

BATH AND THE GREAT EXHIBITION OF 1851

Mary Ede

Bath was one of nearly three hundred places in the United Kingdom that set up Local Committees to support the Great Exhibition of 1851. Once it was decided at the first meeting of the Royal Commission in January 1850 that the Exhibition should be financed by voluntary subscriptions, it was necessary to establish quickly a good system of local organisation. Mayors throughout the country were invited to 'communicate with the principal inhabitants' of their towns and consider setting up a Local Committee. Preliminary soundings by the Royal Society of Arts in the main manufacturing districts during the autumn of 1849 had been encouraging. About 65 Local Committees had already been formed before the Royal Commission was issued. These Local Committees were to organise the collection of suitable exhibits, raise financial contributions and spread information about the Exhibition in their areas. They were also charged with 'facilitating the means of visiting the Exhibition'.

The underlying aim of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations was to bring Art and Manufacture into a profitable alliance and to do it on a mammoth international scale that would promote peace but also demonstrate Britain's lead in the industrial revolution. The exhibition space was to be divided equally between Britain and the Empire on the one hand and foreign nations on the other, with four main sections: Raw Materials, Machinery, Manufactures and Fine Arts. The active involvement of Prince Albert, as President of the Royal Society of Arts, gave it great prestige and high profile. Lady Eastlake was convinced that the Lord Mayor of London's dinner for all the mayors in the country, with Prince Albert as principal guest and speaker, was the chief factor in winning public opinion for the project.

In Bath there was early support for the idea and 126 people had pledged their interest before the Royal Commission was issued.¹ When a public meeting was convened by the Mayor in the Guildhall on the afternoon of 20 March 1850 there was a large attendance. It 'embraced persons of all classes and professions – clergymen, medical and legal gentlemen, tradesmen, and artisans' and even a few ladies.² The main speaker on behalf of the Commission was Major Herbert Hall, a writer on travel and sports. He visited a number of towns in the West Country from Wiltshire to Devon and claimed to have been successful in establishing local groups in seventeen of them.³ He took the line of demolishing objections raised to the idea of the Exhibition, and presumably selected those which he thought appropriate for his Bath audience. In doing so he appealed to their religious convictions, their commercial interests and their civic pride. To the charge, from the religious point of view, that the Exhibition would tend to do harm, that huge crowds could be dangerous and that morals might be threatened, Major Hall countered with the argument that the Bishop of Oxford was a warm promoter. This was a telling name to use in a stronghold of Evangelical clergymen for the Bishop was Samuel Wilberforce, son of William Wilberforce and later the opponent of Huxley in the 1860 debate over the *Origin of Species*. To the objection that foreigners would flood the country with their products he answered that no article would be allowed to be displayed for sale without paying the legal duty. It had indeed been announced in February that foreign articles would pay no customs duty with the Exhibition building acting as a bonded warehouse. To the third objection that the project was nothing more than a great toy Major Hall argued that it was rather a great opportunity for the serious display of British industrial products. Bath might not have much in that line but what about some specimens of its excellent stone formed into vases? Moreover, exhibiting a model of their beautiful city could attract thousands of visitors to Bath. This was indeed an astute suggestion to an out-of-favour spa. The objections raised at this Guildhall meeting were nothing as extreme as some prophets of doom foretold: that there would be outbreaks of plague and cholera, and encouragement of revolution and the proclamation of the Red Republic!

Major Hall was fully supported by other speakers. The Rector

of Bathwick, Rev. H.M. Scarth, had been at the Paris Exhibition of 1849 and reported that large orders had benefited the exhibitors. (One of the aims behind the Great Exhibition was to counter French dominance in design and to rival the very successful Paris Exhibition by staging an *international* one.) He believed that the involvement of all nations in such an exhibition would promote peace throughout the civilised world. Various resolutions of support were put and passed unanimously and a Local Committee was appointed.

The Committee was a very large one with 45 names and might more appropriately be called a patrons' list. It was headed by the Mayor and a couple of peers, the Marquis of Thomond and Viscount Middleton, General Andrews, a baronet and seventeen gentlemen, and then a somewhat larger list of tradesmen, carefully distinguished from their social superiors by the *Bath Chronicle*.⁴ The lead in proposing resolutions came from the gentlemen but Mr Jolly of the Milsom Street firm seconded one of them, expressing his hope that measures would be adopted to secure free admission to the proposed exhibition. The two honorary secretaries were Mr W. Akerman, who was also secretary to the Committee on Fountains in Bath, and Dr James Tunstall. Dr Tunstall, after seven years as resident medical officer of the Bath Hospital, had gone into general practice and was also physician to the Eastern Dispensary. He had published his *Rambles about Bath, and its Neighbourhood* in 1847 and his book on *The Bath Waters* appeared in 1850. He was the effective secretary of the two and energetic in promoting the Committee's activities. The treasurer was Mr William Sutcliffe who invited subscriptions at the close of the meeting when nearly fifty of those present responded with a total of £86.6.6. These included later exhibitors such as the coach-building firms of G. & T. Fuller and R. & E. Vezey; James Williams, the engineer and tool maker in Westgate Buildings; and Edmund White, the outfitter in Edgar Buildings. They also included the Rector of Bath and his wife, Dr Wilbraham Falconer and Dr William Davies, and prominent gentlemen in the city such as William Hunt.

James Tunstall gave lectures in both Bristol and Bath to publicise the Exhibition and encourage further subscriptions. He was obviously authorised by the Commissioners, though he was not on the list of specially appointed Local Commissioners who

liaised between London and Local Committees. There was no one appointed specifically in this way for either Bath or Bristol.⁵

In Bristol nearly three thousand attended and the money reached over £700. At the Bath lecture in June Dr Tunstall tried to encourage further contributions by reporting the praiseworthy efforts of the Police Force in collecting £1.15.9 and the Lodge of Oddfellows £1.1.0.⁶ The final amount raised was £270. It was said that many additional subscriptions which might otherwise have swelled the total had been sent direct to London.⁷

While Dr Tunstall could lecture enthusiastically to an educated audience he admitted he felt ill-fitted to speak to working men, and reported at this public meeting in June that one of the Local Commissioners had visited Bath and promised to find a lecturer 'more in the habit of addressing the working classes'. He would be able to point out ways in which they would benefit from the Great Exhibition. It is not known whether such a communicator came, but in November 1850 a public meeting was again held in the Guildhall – but this time in the evening and not the afternoon – to form plans for organising visits of artisans and working classes to the Exhibition.⁸ Besides the Mayor and Dr Tunstall there were speeches by Mr James Williams, the engineer in Westgate Buildings; Mr Saunders, probably the corn merchant of Town Mills but possibly the partner in Randell & Saunders' quarrying firm; Mr Jolly; Charles Davis, a brightsmith in Walcot St; and even by a working man, Mr Bartlett. An association, the Bath Travelling and Exhibition Association, with a committee of 'tradesmen and operatives', was set up whose aim was to establish a fund by weekly subscriptions and organise special arrangements with the Great Western Railway. This latter negotiation involved James Williams in so much time and correspondence that a presentation was later made to him by the Mayor and leading gentlemen of the city for his public spirit. James Williams was an inventive mechanical engineer and enthusiastic about the Exhibition. At this crowded meeting in November he excited much interest with his model illustrating the way Paxton's building in Hyde Park was being constructed.

Williams's efforts with the G.W.R. were successful and two months after the Exhibition was opened on 1 May 1851 by the Queen the first excursion train left Bath for London at 6.30 a.m.⁹ It contained twenty carriages with over a thousand passengers and

the return fare, allowing a four-day stay in the capital, was 8/8d. Luggage was restricted to a carpet bag. The half-price Bath-London fares were in line with the concessions of the other principal railway companies, though competition between rival companies in some parts of the country brought still lower fares. The cheapest three-week excursion ticket from Leeds to London was only 5/-.¹⁰ Another excursion train from Bath in early August was 28 carriages long with 1400 passengers. In September there were at least seven special trains, and some of these were day returns for 5/- (2nd class) or 9/- (1st class) allowing no luggage. One of these was so popular that open goods trucks were hooked on, and still hundreds were disappointed. Conditions at the station must have been chaotic for even some of the ticket holders failed to get on and were put on the express going later.¹¹ We do not know who went on these special trains but even a journeyman artisan would have found it difficult to save the fare and the 1/- entrance fee out of a weekly wage of about 24/-. An unskilled labourer's wage of half this amount would have put it out of reach. Nevertheless thousands of Bathonians had the opportunity of train travel for the first time and shared in the chorus of approval for the Crystal Palace and its astonishing range of contents. We do not know either whether any Bath workers stayed in the 'monster establishment' near Cubitt's Pimlico Pier which could house a thousand people at 1/3d per night in partitioned cubicles 5ft by 6½ft and which caught the eye of the *Chronicle* editor in January 1851.¹²

The response in Bath of intending exhibitors was very good. About fifty applications for space were approved by the Local Committee and forwarded to London. The Commissioners were overwhelmed by applications from all over the country and each Local Committee's request had to be scaled down. They were asked to maintain, as far as possible, the same proportions in the four main sections. On 2 December the Bath Local Committee met with most of the exhibitors. Only half the requested floor space had been allotted (1169sq.ft. instead of 2344sq.ft.).¹³ Some exhibitors agreed to transfer to wall display where there was still additional space, others accepted the reduction. It seemed that the Bath Committee managed to settle the matter on the spot without resorting to the visits to London that Birmingham and Manchester found necessary.¹⁴

The final number of Bath exhibitors was 46 which compared favourably with 65 from the much larger city of Bristol.¹⁵ There were a number of other places nearby which established Local Committees and sent in exhibits or money: Bradford-on-Avon, Trowbridge, Chippenham, Devizes, Marlborough, Melksham, Swindon, Frome, Taunton, Bridgwater, Yeovil, Glastonbury and Wells. Of these only Taunton and Yeovil had exhibitors in double figures and sent more than £50 to the Commissioners.

In March 1851 descriptions of the various exhibits began to appear in the *Bath Chronicle*, and the exhibits themselves, as they were completed during the next few weeks, went on show to the public before being dispatched to London. A carriage could be admired at Vezey's manufactory in Long Acre, needlework in Edmund White's establishment in Edgar Buildings, walnut tables in Mr Palmer's gutta percha depository in Burton Street, lathes in Mr Williams's workshop in Westgate Buildings. There was also a working model of the Bath-stone sawing machine and crane that was to be exhibited – full size – by Randell & Saunders. While this was an opportunity to see the actual exhibits the *Chronicle* kept the Exhibition constantly before its readers. Once it opened there were frequent reports and sometimes articles from other newspapers, accounts of the number of visitors and financial takings each week, and some critical editorials to offset the lavish admiration. Occasional amusing snippets enliven the rather tedious reports, such as the June entry that so far the lost articles unclaimed included 75 parasols and 175 silk handkerchiefs. Unmemorable verses by 'K.' were published on the Exhibition's promotion of peace and concord. The Great Exhibition gave a handle to all kinds of entertainment, and hot from thirty nights at Drury Lane came M. Julien's 'Great Exhibition Quadrille' in a Grand Concert at the Bath Assembly Rooms. Its 'unprecedented success' in London was not understood by the *Chronicle* reviewer!

In examining the exhibits themselves there are several questions to be considered. Did the objects reflect the range of employment and production in Bath? Were they representative of 'the best ordinary products' of the city as the Exhibition organisers intended? And were they characteristic of current styles and taste?

In 1851 Bath had a population of 54,000. The rapid growth in the first three decades of the century – from about 33,000 in 1801

to 50,000 in 1831 – had been followed by a period of much slower increase and after 1851 the population remained stable. Bath had declined as a pleasure resort and had become a place of permanent residence and retirement for an affluent middle class, especially women, and the industrial and retail sectors of the city provided both necessities and luxuries for the affluent. The servicing of this group explains, at least in part, the marked imbalance in the city's population between male and female. There were nearly twice as many women as men over the age of twenty, and while some 10,000 men were in employment, over 12,000 women worked at a trade or in service.¹⁶ Domestic service swallowed three-quarters of these, but women worked also as milliners, washerwomen, seamstresses, staymakers and shoemakers. The most important trades for men were building, cabinet-making, coach-making, shoemaking and tailoring, engineering, and clothmaking. They were producing for a wide market far beyond the needs of Bath itself. R.S. Neale has described the pattern of employment as 'incipient industrialisation'¹⁷ concentrated in the southern part of the city where overcrowding in living conditions was most marked. There was also concentration of employees in workshops or factories such as the iron foundry of Stothert & Pitt and the cloth factory at Twerton, while shoemakers, like Lulham's Boot and Shoe Warehouse in Union Street with their 20,000 pairs in stock, each employed 30–60 men and needlework establishments could be twice as large: Richard King in Milsom Street for example employed 30 men and 60 women,¹⁸ though many of these were outworkers.

This is not the picture of Bath that the visitor expected from the guidebooks. 'No manufacture worthy of notice is carried on within its limits, nor is it the resort of commerce . . . trade in Bath consists principally in the sale of articles connected with the refinements rather than the necessities of life'.¹⁹ This was the view of Bath evidently shared by Major Hall when he addressed the public meeting in March 1850 and found in his book on *The West of England and the Exhibition, 1851*. A model of the beautiful city or a vase in Bath stone was the nearest he could conceive of a representative example of the city's industry.

In some respects the Bath exhibits in the Great Exhibition bear out this genteel image. The furniture, carriages and invalid chairs,

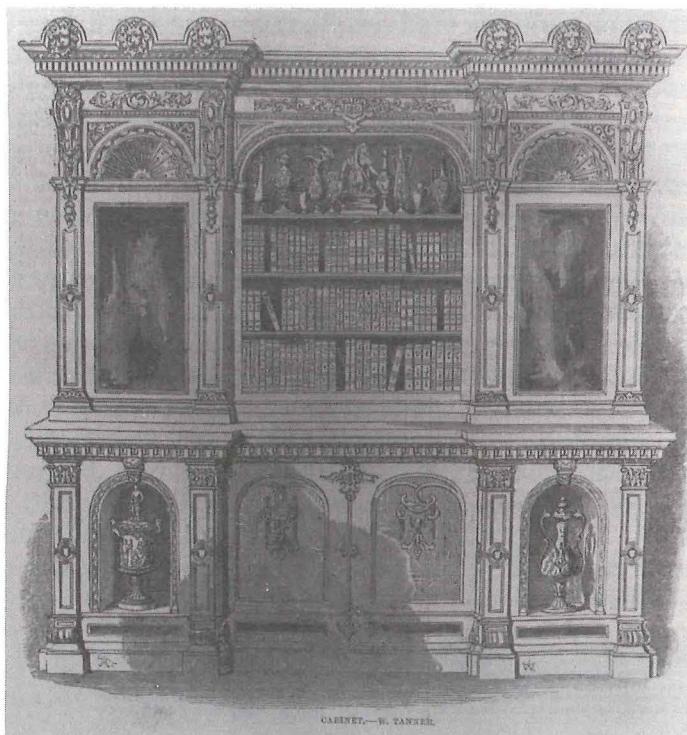
the fancy goods and decorative silverware were all luxury articles or at the very least 'refinements' of ordinary living. Of course they were produced to be exhibition pieces. The Exhibition jury's regret that there were not more specimens of ordinary furniture for general use²⁰ was understandable but it was naive to have expected anything different.

There were some very fine pieces from Bath cabinet-makers. Henry Eyles of Broad Street exhibited a table and chairs with inserted porcelain panels by Chamberlain & Co. of Worcester. The table was 'of pollard oak, supported by four dolphins entwined with foliage of oak and ornamented with various other English devices'. The inserted china panel was in the form of a star with the Prince of Wales's plume and garter. The two carved walnut chairs with marquetry decoration and embroidered satin seats had porcelain portraits of the Queen and Prince Albert respectively. These are all now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Edmund Francis English exhibited several items too, including cabinets of ebony and Italian marbles, and carved ebony light

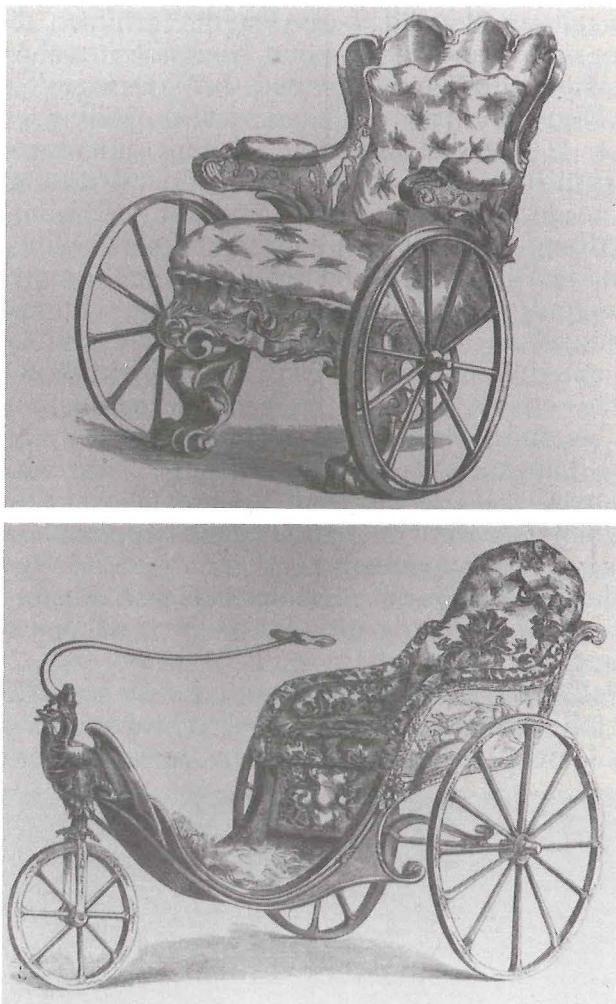


1 Loo-table by Henry Palmer, from *Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue*, 1851.
(Courtesy Bath Reference Library)



2 Cabinet by W. Tanner, from *The Illustrated Exhibitor*, 1851. (Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

brackets, and won the approval of the jury with an honourable mention. Henry Palmer'sloo-table in walnut had a very elaborate carved tripod 'in the Italian style with dancing boys' and he also showed a matching occasional table and a sideboard with emblems of the four seasons in carved relief. Described as 'an eminent upholsterer' by the *Art Journal*,²¹ Palmer must have taken over the large loo-table manufactory of G.E. Phillips at 5–6 James Street which had been established in 1838.²² He also had a gutta percha depository in Burton Street where he stocked glass and picture frames, window cornices, brackets and numerous other articles,²³ and where his exhibits went on show for two days in April 1851, but neither he nor any other Bath maker sent in pieces in this fashionable latex. One of Palmer's journeymen, W.

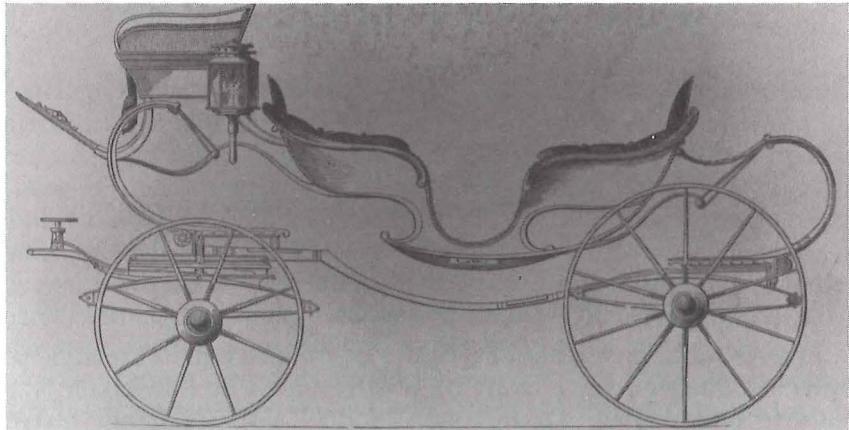


3 Merlin indoor invalid chair and Park chair by James Heath, from *Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue*, 1851. (Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

Tanner, exhibited a cabinet in 'rigo' and pollard oak in the style of Francis I 'adapted for a drawing-room' which he had taken two years to make in his spare time.²⁴ John Calder of James Street showed a walnut circular dining-table with a revolving central section. It too had an elaborately carved pedestal.

The carriages and invalid chairs, like the furniture, displayed a high degree of skilled craftsmanship, and indicated the wealth of those for whom they were intended. F.W. Dawson, continuing the family Bath-chair firm, exhibited a self-propelling wheelchair, and James Heath showed half-a-dozen different types of wheelchairs including the one now in the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. The decoration on this 'Chair of the Seasons' showed allegorical designs of the four seasons in motion, with Spring as a cupid riding in a shell drawn by doves, and so through to Winter as an old man drawn in a chariot by Old Time with his scythe.²⁵ He also showed an invalid indoor chair for self-propulsion and a 'newly-invented reclining and elevating spinal bed wheelchair, designed to enable invalids to take airings without inconvenience'. A third Bath-chair exhibitor was Ben Newnham, based, like James Heath, in Broad Street. The two carriages displayed by G. & T. Fuller and R. & E. Vezey were greatly admired when they went on view. Fuller's Landau had improved springs and a more convenient hood. Vezey's Sovereign Sociable was also designed for a more comfortable and quieter ride with india-rubber bearings in the springs and the inside lined with rich drab silk and lace.²⁶

Major Hall's suggestion of a Bath-stone vase was taken up and carved by John Vaughan out of a block from Lodge Style quarry on Combe Down. It was considered, by the *Chronicle*, a 'striking

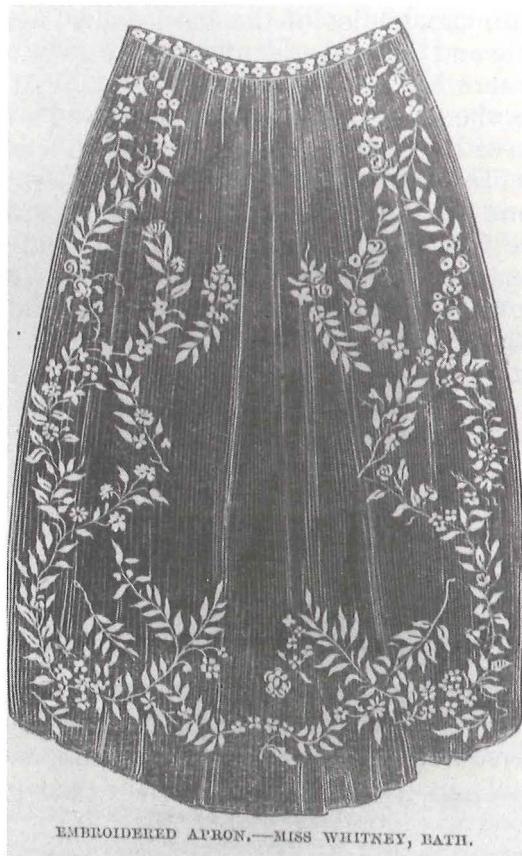


4 Carriage by R. & E. Vezey, from *Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue*, 1851.
(Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

example of the capabilities of the Bath oolite', with carving as 'sharp, delicate and defined as similar workings in wood'. Also in Bath-stone was a bust of Milton, carved by W.H. Newman of Bathford. Another purely decorative piece was a silver vase by Payne & Sons of 21 Old Bond Street, Bath, who were described in the 1850 *Bath Directory* as goldsmiths and jewellers in ordinary to the Queen and royal family. It was designed after an antique marble in the Capitoline Museum in Rome, and following the Exhibition was bought by General Andrews of Vellore, Sydney Road. Payne & Sons made the new mayoral badge and chain which were bought by public subscription to mark the occasion of the Exhibition.²⁷

The fourth group of exhibits that lends credence to the genteel image of Bath in the mid-nineteenth century was a variety of fancy goods, mostly embroidery. James Warrell of Dafford Street, Larkhall, displayed a number of ladies' baskets lined with silk and satin: work-baskets, knitting-baskets, travelling baskets, as examples of the pretty containers to be found in the drawing rooms of the middle classes. Mrs Cornelia Mee, who offered lessons in crochet, foreign knitting and needlework to the leisured ladies of such households from her Berlin Wool Needlework and Embroidery establishment in Milsom Street,²⁸ won an award for her collection of exhibits. The centrepiece was a silk embroidered banner with the flags of all nations (the British in the centre) held by a figure of Peace modelled from Canova's statue. There was a satin lady's apron by Miss E. Whitney with flowers and leaves worked in their natural colours in silk embroidery; a crochet quilt decorated with the Ten Commandments in Old English characters designed and executed by a 14-year-old girl; a completely furnished cradle and layette from Edmund White's linen hall in Edgar Buildings; a cambric shirt from Mr Alexander decorated like a modern T-shirt with 1851 and the royal arms and national emblems;²⁹ and a collection of baskets made by a Mary Jane Cannings who lived at the Institution for Deaf and Dumb Children at 9 Walcot Parade and was herself blind, deaf and dumb.

These fancy articles reflect the market in Bath for finely executed needlework and embroidery. They also indicate the existence of numerous workshops and the employment available, particularly for women. Over two thousand women were in fact



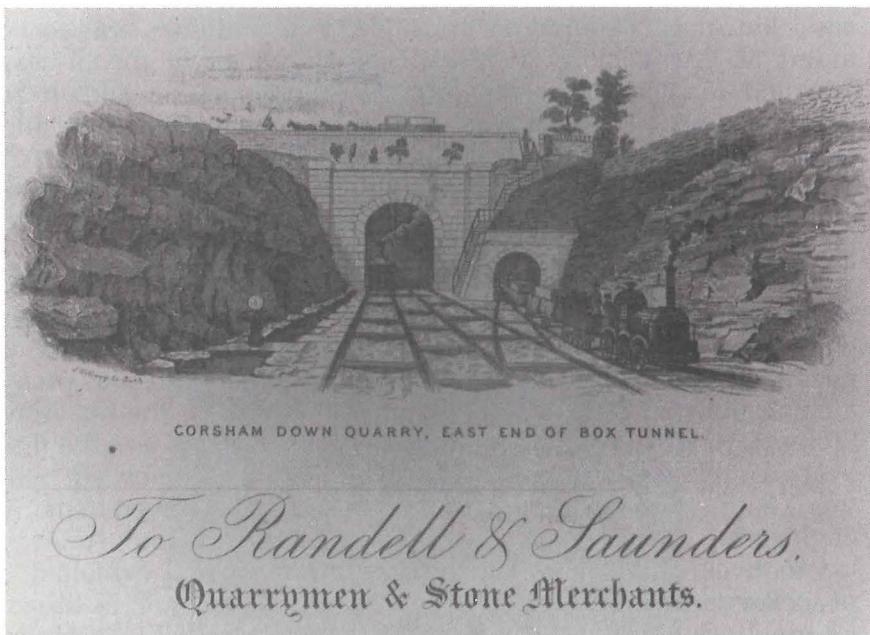
5 Embroidered apron by Miss E. Whitney, from *The Illustrated Exhibitor*, 1851.
(Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

engaged in the tailoring and millinery trades in 1851. The workshop with its retail outlet (the only part of the establishment usually seen by the customers) was characteristic of shoemaking too. Hutchings of 20 Green Street exhibited a lady's boot 'with noiseless rotary heel' and a gentleman's 'elastic half-dress ankle boot suitable for feet troubled with corns and bunions'. J. & H. Hutchings were one of 46 shoe-making firms listed in the 1850 *Directory*; round the corner in Broad Street was another where upward of three thousand pairs were kept in stock. Coach-making and cabinet-making too were organised on a workshop

basis, but mass production under factory conditions was to be found at Carr's cloth mills at Twerton. A prize medal was awarded for their fine cloths and especially those known as beavers, double-sided winter cloth made from Australian and German wool and 'of considerable novelty of production'.³⁰ When Mr W. Carr returned from London with the award at the end of the Exhibition he was cheered by a crowd of weavers and the ringing of the bells of Twerton Church.³¹

Cloth had been a staple product of Bath in earlier centuries but these 1851 examples were produced by machinery and machines were the major focus of the Exhibition. So the Bath examples of machinery and tools are particularly interesting. There was firstly a crane 'for dock or wharf with improvements in the jib' from Stothert, Rayno & Pitt of the Newark Foundry. This was the first properly recorded Stothert & Pitt crane and was labelled 'Stothert, Bath'.³² Its designer, Henry Stothert, was involved in many engineering enterprises including steam engines, pumps, railway locomotives and ships. His Bristol company also exhibited a propeller engine, identical to one in use in a steamer on the Bristol Channel, though in this case the designer was his partner, Edward Slaughter.

The second group of machinery exhibits from Bath also included a crane. This was a traversing crane driven by steam power and constructed for working in underground quarries. It was shown by Randell & Saunders, the leading quarry owners in the area. There was a rapid expansion of stone quarry work after the opening of the railway line in 1841, giving direct access to the stone beds beneath Box and Corsham downs and opening up a country-wide market for Bath stone.³³ Randell & Saunders also showed a 'patent machine for driving saws' for use at the stone face that drove the 'saws from one end only' and enabled them to be used at any angle; and a couple of saw frames for cutting blocks of stone. They had additionally extended their interests into brick making, for with T. Grimsley of Oxford they showed a variety of innovations in machines for pressing and cutting bricks, producing a thousand bricks an hour, and in the design of bricks and tiles. There was also a 'model of fire-proof cottages, constructed of hollow brick, with provision for heating, ventilation and drainage'. Randell & Saunders had a Bath office at 14 Orange Grove, from where another Saunders (Edward) ran his



6 Randell & Saunders' letter-head showing entrance to their quarry. (Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

milling business at the Town Mills. Edward Saunders was an active member of the Local Committee.

The third group in the machinery section was a variety of tools and lathes made by James Williams, whose activities have already been mentioned. Some of these he designed himself, others were invented by local Bath residents, John Wilson Esq. and Rev. C.R. Davy. The latter also designed the 'one-horse portable steam engine, for amateurs' that Williams had made. Such cooperation between gentlemen-amateurs and craftsmen was not uncommon but it shows one of the ways in which a small metal-working workshop in Bath was providing an increasing range of tools as mechanisation spread. The 1852 *Directory* lists Williams as manufacturer to Prince Albert and the Prince of Wales. Was this a result of the Exhibition?

Inventions and improvements in manufacture were the hallmarks of the Exhibition and Bath exhibits were no exception, whether in the pioneering Stothert crane or in T.W. Knight's 'bolt

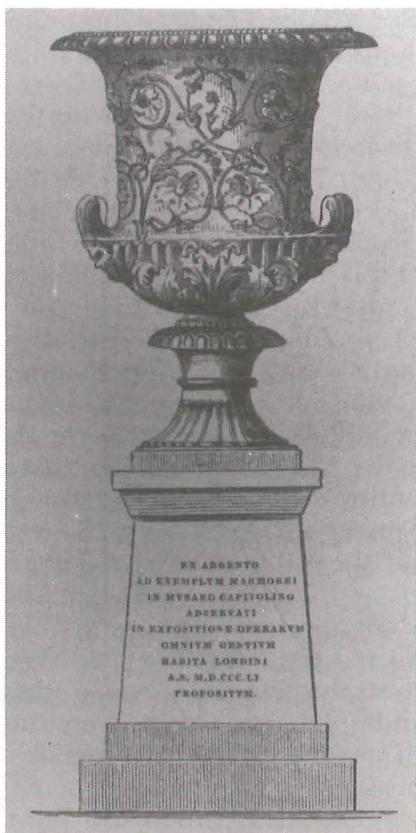
for folding doors, which fasten on closing the right-hand door'. C.C. Davis, the brightsmith bell-hanger and gas-fitter of 12 Walcot Street, who had been one of the speakers at the public meeting in November 1850, invented 'a portable waterfall for clearing sewers and water closets', and Simon King a 'ventilating and smoke-consuming stove grate' which won an award and the suggestion from the *Chronicle* that it ought to claim a space in every chimney corner of the United Kingdom if it could be proved to eliminate smoking chimneys.³⁴

Inventiveness of another kind was displayed in Henry Stothert's plan 'for removing the sewage of London without disturbing the present arrangement of drains',³⁵ and in Isaac Pitman's 'chart of phonographic and phototypic alphabets' and his examples of the Bible printed phonetically and the New Testament in short-hand. It was thought necessary to insert an editorial explanation in the official Catalogue about this phonetic system, and to point out its difficulties where pronunciation varied from one district to another. Pitman's first book on Stenographic Sound-Hand had been printed in his own house in 1844 and he had given up his teaching post the following year to concentrate on his life-long endeavours to promote reformed spelling and shorthand. In 1851 he had premises in Albion Place on the Upper Bristol Road, moving four years later to Parsonage Lane. The *Chronicle* made no reference to Pitman, unaware of the future international fame of his system of shorthand; neither did the newspaper notice the new musical notation proposed by the pianoforte-maker Joseph Davis which was not adopted, nor the invention by the writing master William Stidolph of his chiragon, 'a hand guide for blind and tremulous writers'.

The range of Bath exhibits, then, was very wide and drawn from the major, and some minor, areas of productive employment. The large service sector – primarily domestic service – falls outside these areas but the other eight main trades for men were all represented in the exhibits. These however are only in part representative of 'the best ordinary products' of the City, for most of them were not 'ordinary' at all. They were inevitably special, inevitably slanted towards the extravagant, the decorative, the ingenious. In design terms they reflected many current styles and tastes and found themselves among similar objects in the Crystal Palace.

It was the elaborate and often patriotic ornament that attracted attention and local admiration. No doubt it was also recognised for its mercantile value. The heavily carved supports for the tables by Eyles and Palmer, the inlaid cabinets of English, the painted panels on Heath's wheelchair, were matched by similar tables, cabinets and wheelchairs in the Great Exhibition. To contemporaries ornament was a necessity. Critics might question its appropriateness but they did not believe that successful design could consist solely in the form of the object without any decoration. The *Journal of Design*, in its campaign to promote a more fruitful marriage of art and industry, declared that 'all European nations at the present time begin manufacture with ornament and put utility in the background'.³⁶ The carving of Palmer's table may have inconvenienced those sitting round it but apart from that it cannot be said that any ornament on the Bath pieces interfered with their function. Some of the excesses of Victorian ornamentation came from the ease of mass-produced press and moulding methods, whereas none of the Bath domestic exhibits was machine-made. It should be noted also that none of the Bath decorative exhibits displayed any originality in style and that in furniture similar pieces were being made fifteen years earlier.³⁷

The local press offered no aesthetic criticism at all but described all the exhibits with enthusiastic pride. Comment from the *Art Journal* was more discerning and Henry Palmer received praise for his 'very graceful design'.³⁸ A more searching critic might have questioned the appropriateness of 'the dancing boys' supporting a drawing room table and even more so the dolphins of Henry Eyles's table, whereas the decoration of the Heath wheelchair, with its symbolism of the seasons in motion, would have been applauded. Moreover the graceful lines of the chair were unimpeded. The carriages, too, shared this elegance of form, 'a series of handsome sweeps and scrolls'.³⁹ Tanner's cabinet was criticised for the mixing of different coloured woods and for the heaviness of its ebony slab. The ornamentation however was found to be 'rich without heaviness or redundancy' and the design 'very chaste and elegant much to the credit of an operative cabinet-maker of Bath'.⁴⁰ At least no Bath exhibit would have drawn Ruskin's fire on the use of imitation materials. Palmer, as we have seen, did not include any gutta percha exhibits and there were no cast-iron objects in the guise of bamboo, or papier-mâché.



7 Silver vase by Payne & Sons, from *Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue*, 1851.
(Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

in that of wood. Indeed the vase in Bath stone was designed to show the virtues of the stone and did so in an appropriate form. Payne's vase in silver was commended by Ralph Wornum in his prize essay, 'The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste'.⁴¹ Since he found in general an 'absence of any fixed principles in ornamental design',⁴² this put Payne's vase among the few he considered good (though he found the design of English silver as a whole inferior to the French).

After the Exhibition closed in October the Local Committee met for the last time on 6 November. They drew up addresses of

congratulation to Prince Albert and the Royal Commissioners and to Mr Dowding, the previous mayor under whose chairmanship the Bath Committee had been launched. There was some cause for satisfaction in Bath's involvement. With 46 exhibitors there were only fourteen other towns with a larger number. Four awards had been won. The Committee's secretary, Dr Tunstall, had been commended by the Commissioners and pressed to accept a gratuity from them of £30. The whole enterprise had been a typical example of nineteenth-century municipal energy with the marshalling of resources in time and money from the two leading social groups, gentlemen and tradesmen. They worked together, but remained socially separate, and in this form the Local Committee for the Great Exhibition functioned no differently from committees for schools, or the Penitentiary, or for civic amenities like the Victoria Park or the Laura Place fountain. The Exhibition venture however involved a great many more Bathonians, who made use of the special excursion trains to London, and gave the local newspaper nearly two years of continuing 'copy'.

Were there any more permanent results? Was it a boost to Bath's trade or to the tourist industry, as Major Hall had suggested? The spa's fortunes were not revived, though it is interesting that several Sunday excursion trains were run from London to Bath in 1851 (with an outcry from a number of Sabbatarians). Some individual businesses were given a boost. 'As seen in the Exhibition' was useful advertising. Mr Newnham sold the wheelchair he exhibited and had orders for three more.⁴³ The account of the Empress of France being escorted in one of James Heath's chairs to the royal refreshment room at the Crystal Palace no doubt had its 'mercantile value'.⁴⁴ The *Chronicle* editor however believed that Bath trade in general was dislocated by the Exhibition. Far from attracting trade in the summer off-period, or foreign visitors after their visit to Hyde Park, there were no additional visitors during the dull months of July, August and September and the residents were incited to leave.

If you wish to transact business with your solicitor – he is gone to the Exhibition. If you are ill – you may esteem yourself lucky if your medical man is not critically examining the anatomical preparation and surgical instrument makers' stands at the Exhibition. If you want to have any confidential communication with your butcher,

your baker, your hatter, your tailor, or your shoemaker – you are handed over to his assistant, for 'Master is gone to the Exhibition' . . . If you are in trade, your journeymen, your apprentices, your porters, waylay you with round robins 'hoping that you will give them a few days' holiday to visit the Exhibition'. Your cook and housemaid put in the same petition, and if you allow either of them to go, happy is she who is not delayed in her journey because the charwoman who is to do duty in her absence, has not yet returned from the Crystal Palace.⁴⁵

Rather than bring money *into* Bath, the Exhibition had drawn it away.

In the long term the Exhibition was of marginal significance in the fortunes of Bath's economy, but the writer just quoted had unwittingly put his finger on one aspect of the Exhibition that is important but harder to quantify: namely, the enlargement of individuals' experience in the excitement of a railway journey to see the sights of the Crystal Palace. The impression of the remarkable building itself led to a proposal to build a Bath Crystal Palace, Music Hall and Winter Garden in Victoria Park and Paxton's influence on James Wilson's design of 1857⁴⁶ is obvious. But it came to nothing and Bath had to be content with the naming of a pub in Abbey Green.

Notes

All exhibits are listed in *The Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, 1851*, 3 vols (London, 1851) and individual references are not given here. All quotations not identified are from *The Official Catalogue*.

- 1 *First Report of the Commissioners for the Exhibition of 1851* (London, 1852), app. XL.
- 2 *Bath Chronicle* 21 Mar 1850.
- 3 H.B. Hall, *The West of England and the Exhibition, 1851* (London, 1851), p. 1.
- 4 *Bath Chronicle* 28 Mar 1850.
- 5 *First Report*, p. xxi.
- 6 *Bath Chronicle* 20 June 1850.
- 7 *ibid.* 13 Nov 1851.
- 8 *ibid.* 21 Nov 1850.
- 9 *ibid.* 10 July 1851.
- 10 *Official Catalogue* Vol. 1, p. 27; *First Report*, app. XXIV.
- 11 *Bath Chronicle* 4 Sept 1851.

- 12 See also *Tallis's History and Description of the Crystal Palace* (London, 1852), vol. 1, p. 27.
- 13 *First Report*, app. XL.
- 14 *ibid.*, app. VII.
- 15 *ibid.*, app. XL. The numbers refer to applicants offered space. There is some discrepancy between the *Report* and the *Official Catalogue*.
- 16 R.S. Neale, *Bath 1680–1850: a Social History* (London, 1981), p. 277.
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 270.
- 18 1851 census.
- 19 S. Gibbs, *The Bath Visitant* (Bath, 1850), pp. 29–30.
- 20 *Report by the Juries* (London, 1852), p. 544.
- 21 *Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue* (1851), p. 256.
- 22 Holburne Museum, *Furniture Made in Bath* (Bath, 1985), p. 11.
- 23 *Bath Chronicle* 20 Nov 1851.
- 24 *ibid.* 27 Mar 1851. 'Rigo' is presumably Riga as oak from Baltic countries was much used by 19th century English cabinet-makers.
- 25 *ibid.* 27 Mar 1851.
- 26 *Art Journal Illus. Cat.*, p. 261.
- 27 *Bath Notes and Queries*, 2 June 1851. (Bath Reference Library).
- 28 *Bath Directory* 1850, advertisement.
- 29 Not listed in *Official Catalogue*: it may have been withdrawn at the last minute or possibly shown under another exhibitor's name.
- 30 *Report of Juries*; J. de L. Mann, *The Cloth Industry in the West of England 1640 to 1880* (Oxford, 1971), p. 197.
- 31 *Bath Chronicle* 23 Oct 1851.
- 32 H. Torrens, *The Evolution of a Family Firm: Stothert and Pitt of Bath* (Bath, 1978), p. 49; see *Stothert and Pitt Magazine* 13 (Nos 1 and 2) 1960 Bath, pp. 80–81, for illustration of the crane, reproduced from a picture at the Royal Hotel, Scarborough.
- 33 K. Hudson, *The Fashionable Stone* (1971), p. 54.
- 34 *Bath Chronicle* 8 Apr 1851.
- 35 See H. Torrens, op. cit., p. 32 for Stothert's 1850 proposals.
- 36 *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, Vol. 5 (Aug 1851), p. 158.
- 37 E. Aslin, *Nineteenth Century English Furniture* (London, 1962), p. 37.
- 38 *Art Journal Illus. Cat.*, p. 256.
- 39 *Bath Chronicle* 3 Apr 1851.
- 40 W.M. Clark, *The Crystal Palace* (London, 1852), p. 368.
- 41 The essay is printed as a supplement in *Art Journal Illus. Cat.*
- 42 *Journal of Design*, op. cit., p. 158.
- 43 *Bath Chronicle* 23 Oct 1851.
- 44 H.F. Keevil, *The Cabinet Making Trade of Bath 1740–1964* (Bath, 1964), p. 21.
- 45 *Bath Chronicle* 4 Sept 1851.
- 46 Bath Crystal Palace, Music Hall and Winter Garden Company, *Prospectus*, 1857 (Bath Reference Library).