ENGLISH SPAS

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The word spa is derived from a Walloon word, *espa*, a fountain, and is taken from Spa, the Belgian town sixteen miles from Liège. A resort was founded there by Collin le Loup, an iron master who was cured by its chalybeate springs in 1326. The word appeared for the first time in English at the end of the sixteenth century. Edmund Deane, in his *Spadacrene Anglica* of 1626, attributed it to Dr. Timothy Bright, a graduate from Cambridge, describing the recently found Tewit Well near Knaresborough in Yorkshire. He called it the 'English Spaw', a spelling which survived for at least a century.

The rise of the modern spa was not so much an innovation as a revival. Britain could boast of two hot springs, Buxton in Derbyshire and Bath in Somersetshire, and their medical properties had been recognised from at least Roman times. Both towns were important settlements during the Roman occupation and, if little evidence remains at Buxton, the ruins of an extremely elaborate and luxurious bathing establishment may be seen at Bath today. It had fallen into disrepair when the Saxons invaded the west of England, only to be rescued and rebuilt by Benedictine monks who remained in charge until the dissolution of the monasteries. The Poor Law Act of 1572 mentions Bath and Buxton as places where sick people could resort in search of a cure to their ailments.

Even primitive man had discovered that water, whether hot or cold, possessed healing properties; these were attributed not so much to the action of the water itself, but to the supernatural powers of nymphs and river-gods. Hence the existence of temples in their vicinity, as at Epidaurus in Greece or Aquae Sulis, as Bath was called by the Romans. The advent of Christianity to the British Isles did little to change the former
pagan cult of water. The village well became the meeting place where preachers addressed crowds and performed baptisms. As Evangelization spread, a number of springs became credited with miraculous powers and known as holy wells; often a shrine was built in their immediate surroundings. Each was dedicated to a saint – St Chad or St Anne in many places – and known for a specific cure. St Winifred’s Well in Flintshire was said to be effective for people with erysipelas, while St Magnus’s Well in Yorkshire was visited by people with sore eyes. Pilgrims flocked to these holy wells not only in search of a cure, but also to pray for the end of an epidemic or a war. Drinking the water was part of the ritual together with offerings and prayers.

Such practices lingered even after the Reformation and the condemnation of holy wells by King Henry VII after his break with the Church of Rome. Celia Fiennes, travelling across England in the last years of the seventeenth century, encountered some Catholic pilgrims, both at St Winifred’s Well and at St Mungo’s (St Magnus’) Well in Yorkshire;

But there I saw abundance of the devout papists on their knees all round the well; poor people are deluded into ignorant blind zeale and to be pity’d by us that had the advantage of knowing better and ought to be better.1

Nevertheless, a severe blow had been dealt to holy wells by the Reformation. Most of them were sealed, and every shrine destroyed, every statue defaced. In Buxton for example, St Anne’s Chapel was pulled down ‘so there should not be more idolatry and superstition’.2 With the departure of religious orders, baths and wells fell into neglect and disrepair.

Meanwhile on the Continent the situation was quite different. The advent of the Renaissance and the return to classical Antiquity meant that baths and bathing knew a great revival especially in Italy where thermal springs were legion, where Roman monuments abounded, and where medical schools flourished. Several treatises on balneology had been published there, extolling the virtues of bathing. In the new Humanism water was used not so much to purify the soul, as to fortify the body.

These new ideas eventually found their way to England through the writings of Dr. William Turner, a zealous reformer who went into exile during the reign of Mary Tudor. Having
witnessed the prosperity and luxury of baths, both in Italy and in Germany, he came back to Britain around 1560 and published the first work on English mineral waters. Deploving the sorry state of Bath and Buxton, he exhorted his fellow-countrymen to a better use of their natural resources:

He that had been in Italye and Germany and had seen how costly and well favoredly the baths are trimmed and appointed there in divers and sundrye places, would be ashamed that anye stranger whyche had seene the bathes in foren landes should looke upon our baths.3

Dr. Turner's plea was heard. Several pamphlets on the subject of mineral waters appeared in English before the end of the sixteenth century. From 1600 onwards, a spirit of scientific curiosity developed, leading to the discovery of new springs: Tunbridge Wells in 1606, Epsom in 1618, Scarborough in 1626. The many springs around Harrogate also came to be known around 1620. Medical treatises continued to proliferate, inviting patients to take advantage of the new panacea. Most of the time the newly-found wells - now called spas - were situated in remote places, difficult of access, even in the middle of summer. There was no shelter from the inclemency of the English weather, no amenity of any sort, except, if you were lucky a wooden hut. Perhaps it was the spartan conditions of those early spas which saved them from the drastic rule of the Puritans. Although a permit was sometimes necessary before travelling to a watering-place during the Civil War – as the Cavaliers were suspected of using them as rallying points – patients still visited them on strictly medical grounds.

However, this situation came to an end with the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy. Charles II had spent his exile in France. He had seen the French Court leave the capital during the hot months and stay at watering places such as Bourbon or Vichy. Spa life was relaxed, etiquette was abandoned and everyone enjoyed themselves. Charles II, fond of pleasure himself, was anxious to introduce this way of life into English society. English people, after so many years of Puritan rule, were ready for diversion. They needed a change of scene and the spas provided an ideal playground. Health was the excuse, as medical pamphlets appeared in greater numbers than ever, encouraged
by the creation of the Royal Society in 1662. Mineral waters were said to cure sterility in women, so the King took Catherine of Braganza to Tunbridge. She failed to produce an heir to the throne, but the small resort became an idyllic and rural setting for all the frolicks and follies of the Restoration period, so well depicted by Alexander Hamilton in *The Memoirs of the Comte de Grammont*. Successive Stuart monarchs granted their patronage to Tunbridge. James II took his first wife Anne Hyde there, and his two daughters Mary and Anne Stuart; the latter went there with her son, the Duke of Gloucester. The aristocracy followed on their heels. The small village prospered and grew into a fashionable resort.

However, the enjoyment of spas was not restricted to the upper classes. The wealthy London merchants and the tradesmen of the City elected to go to the more accessible Epsom in Surrey. In summer they sent their wives to enjoy the country air, joining them in the evening after having attended to their business during the day:

> For tis very frequent for the trading part of the Company to place their families here, and take their horses every morning to London, to the Exchange, to the Alley, or to the Warehouse, and be at Epsom at night. ⁴

Those merchants were in their turn imitated by their apprentices and workmen. They too felt the need to escape from their workshops and crowded dwellings. Unable to afford a carriage or a horse they contented themselves with walking to the neighbouring villages where minor spas had been discovered. They went to Hampstead, to Islington, or to Sadler’s Wells, for a day’s outing like the dyer and his wife represented by Hogarth in his engraving entitled ‘Evening’ (illustration 1).

Others preferred the spas situated to the south of the Thames, such as Dulwich or Streatham. Describing the latter, Daniel Defoe summed up the situation at the turn of the century:

> Namely, that as the nobility and gentry go to Tunbridge, the merchants and rich citizens to Epsome; so the common people go chiefly to Dullwich and Streatham; and the rather also because it lyies so near London; that they can walk to it in the morning and return at night, which abundance do. ⁵
At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the demand for spas increased. The Methuen Treaty signed in 1703 with Portugal changed English drinking habits: port was now preferred to French claret. As a consequence, gout became a widespread disease among the upper classes and doctors prescribed mineral
waters as a possible cure. Gout was probably the cause for the two successive visits to Bath, in 1702 and 1703, of Queen Anne and her royal consort, Prince George of Denmark. The preference for Bath on these two occasions certainly gave the town the impetus it needed to overcome its main seventeenth century rival, Tunbridge.

Until then, the great distance from London, the bad roads, the discomfort of bathing rather than drinking the waters, had kept many people away. But the royal visit started a chain of events which led to the transformation of Bath. A decisive factor may have been a change in the form of the cure: physicians began to advocate the internal use of Bath water, as an alternative to bathing. In his *Practical Dissertation on Bath Water* published in 1707, Dr. William Oliver the elder prescribed both uses and gave a long list of diseases for which the waters were beneficial.

As if royal and medical patronage were not enough, Bath received the support of Beau Nash, a professional gambler, who settled in the city in 1705 and took upon himself to organise a daily routine for the invalids. Working in conjunction with the Corporation and using the visitors' subscriptions as a financial tool, the self-appointed Master of Ceremonies was able to suggest numerous changes to the small, medieval city. The roads leading to Bath were improved. In 1706 John Harvey built the first pump-room, and 1708 saw the erection of the first assembly-room.

The possession of such amenities became the ambition of every would-be spa. Contemporary pamphlets describing budding resorts all mention 'long rooms' or 'great rooms', even giving their measurements. At Scarborough for example, the Long Room

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\text{is a noble spacious Building, sixty Foot long, thirty wide, and sixteen high; the Situation being so lofty, commands a Prospect over the Sea, and you may sit in the Windows and see the Ships sailing at several Leagues distance.}^6
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Yet the provision of such facilities was not enough to ensure the success of a spa. In 1740, Thomas Short listed 228 mineral wells in his *History of Mineral Waters*, and only a few of them blossomed into proper health resorts. Some achieved a brief notoriety, but were soon abandoned. Only a row of houses, or the name of a
street ‘spa road’ or ‘well walk’, remind the passer-by of the existence of a medicinal well in the area. Others only attracted a local clientele and their fame did not stretch beyond the limits of the county. Among the wells which became spas, many never reached what geographers call ‘urban status’.

What then, were the basic ingredients necessary to become a successful resort in the first half of the eighteenth century? The most important factor was probably accessibility. As we have seen, the seventeenth century spas were all within reach of London. One of the first initiatives taken by Bath Corporation was to improve the roads in the vicinity. Scarborough achieved its fame early in the century, only because it had a reasonably good road leading to it.

The medicinal properties of a spring played a key role. The early decline of Epsom in the 1730s was blamed on John Levingstone, an apothecary who opened a new well when the old one ran out of water. This ‘spurious spa’ was soon deserted by the invalids. On the other hand, the propaganda spread by so many treatises on Bath waters, together with the presence of so many leading physicians of the period, certainly contributed to the popularity of the Somerset spa.

Another important factor was the quality of the accommodation available to visitors. The scarcity of lodgings often prevented a spa from becoming more frequented. Even that indefatigable traveller Celia Fiennes was put out by the housing conditions at Buxton Hall:

2 beds in a room some 3 beds and some 4 in one roome, so if you have not Company enough of your own to fill a room they will be ready to put others in the same chamber.

The lack of decent accommodation was also noted some twenty years later by Daniel Defoe:

and though some other houses in the town take in lodgers upon occasion, yet the conveniences are not the same; so that there is not accommodation for a confluence of people, as at the Bath House itself: If it were otherwise, and that the Nobility and the Gentry were suitably entertained, I doubt not but Buxton would be frequented and with much more effect as to Health, as well as much more satisfaction to the Company.
The author of the *Tour through the whole Island of Great Britain* deplored the fact that well-to-do people preferred Bath, a place which Defoe himself held in very little esteem:

more like a prison than a place of diversion, scarce gives the company room to converse out of the smell of their own excrements, and where the very City itself may be said to stink like a general common shore.

Despite such criticism, the meteoric rise of Bath, which had started in the reign of Queen Anne, continued during those of the Georges. The town remained a flourishing medical centre, with an increasing number of physicians and apothecaries practising in the city. From 1742 the General Hospital welcomed poor strangers and gave them free medical assistance. Controversies regarding the management of the hospital or the composition of the mineral water proved the interest in hydrotherapy.

Thanks to the long reign of Beau Nash as Master of Ceremonies the aristocracy and gentry were suitably entertained. After Nash’s death in 1761, his post was filled – although never so successfully – and new Assembly Rooms were built in 1771, to meet the demands of the expanding town.

Another of Bath’s assets, besides its hot waters, was of course its jurassic limestone. Quarried and commercialised by Ralph Allen, it was used to develop the city according to the ambitious plans of the local architect John Wood. Cooperation between Allen and Wood enabled Bath to become much more than a fashionable spa: a Palladian city of majestic proportions, the perfect setting for the elegant society who had received the lessons of Beau Nash.

The death of Nash, then of Ralph Allen and William Oliver the younger in 1764, marked the end of an era in Bath. John Wood had died in 1754, but his son carried on his father’s work, so there was no discontinuity in the architectural development of the city. But socially things changed as the astounding number of visitors – Penelope Corfield estimates that in 1773 approximately 608 people entered and left the city every week – could no longer be received individually and introduced personally by the Master of Ceremonies. Everywhere, according to contemporary accounts, there was a crowd, a bustle and a hustle.

The loss of Bath’s exclusive character helped to bring other spas
into favour. Significantly, Fanny Burney’s heroine, Evelina, is found at the Hotwells in 1778. A visit to the Clifton spa had for a long time been a favourite outing for Bath invalids and by that date many of them preferred to take the waters there. This small resort, whose main attraction was its dramatic situation in the Avon gorge, remained fashionable until about 1790. Also in Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, whose mineral springs had been discovered about 1716, had quietly risen to fame under the management of its proprietor, Henry Skillicorne. It became more frequented in the last years of the eighteenth century. George III, his wife and two daughters made their visit there in 1788 and gave the town their seal of approval. Well-to-do patients followed the example of the Royal Family. The arrival of distinguished guests was announced in the Gloucester Journal, a practice imitated from Bath, still the model for reference. Cheltenham’s first Master of Ceremonies, Simeon Moreau, had been a candidate for Beau Nash’s succession. Both Clifton and Cheltenham experienced the same rage for building as Bath during those years. Both remained fashionable residential towns long after their waters had lost their original appeal.

A change in taste was also responsible for the rise of new spas, or the renewed popularity of ancient ones which had failed hitherto to flourish. As the romantic period dawned, there was a growing awareness of beautiful scenery and wild nature. For the last generation of health-seekers in the eighteenth century, the priority was no longer the social amenities of a spa but the attraction of its surrounding landscape. Already the scenery around the Hotwells delighted some of the visitors preoccupied with picturesque beauty. Guidebooks describing the newly favoured resorts dwelt on their fine prospects and the beauty of their environs.

On the other hand, Bath, the spa par excellence, now appeared too formal, too urbanized, for the connoisseur. In one of her letters Elizabeth Montagu explained to her correspondent why she preferred the rusticity of Tunbridge:

In some respects this place is inferior to the Bath, in some it is better. We are not confined here in streets; the houses are scattered irregularly, and Tunbridge Wells looks, from the window I now sit by, a little like the village you see from our terrace at Sandleford.
The same feeling was expressed by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*:

> He talked of foregrounds, distances, and second distances; side-scenes and perspectives; lights and shades; and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar that when she reached the top of Beechen Cliff, she rejected the whole city of Bath as unworthy to make part of a landscape.¹²

This cult of the picturesque, heralding the romantic movement, made places like Buxton and Harrogate fashionable again. Both spas came into their own and flourished during the Victorian era: they were joined by latecomers like Malvern and Matlock. The craze for romantic scenery had been succeeded by a quest for bracing air and healthy exercise. Victorian spas offered this return to outdoor life and natural pleasures. In this respect, they were in competition with seaside resorts. Sea-bathing had been practised at Scarborough as early as 1736 (illustration 2) in addition to attendance at the Well, but it had become a more established form of cure after the publication in 1753 of Dr. Richard Russell’s *Dissertation on the use of Sea-Water in the Diseases of the Glands*. Once more royal patronage played a decisive role in launching a new fashion. More people rushed to the seaside following George III’s visit to Weymouth in 1789 and after the Prince Regent had a residence in Brighton. In her unfinished novel *Sanditon* (Sandy town) Jane Austen gently poked fun at the speculation fever caused by the new interest in coastal resorts.

In 1841 A.B. Granville published *The Spas of England*. This fashionable London physician mentioned 70 resorts including sea-bathing places. This figure indicates the decline of inland spas when compared to the 228 springs mentioned by Thomas Short a century before, while it shows at the same time the growing importance of seaside towns, soon to be increased with the development of the railways. But the final blow to inland spas was probably the vogue for travelling abroad. Significantly, the Continental spas had their heyday in the nineteenth century, while in England it was the eighteenth century which was, in the words of the historian R.B. Mowat, ‘the age of watering places’.¹³

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Inevitably, spas have left their mark on British civilisation. What was originally a medical necessity became, as decades went by, a
2 SCARBOROUGH Engraving after Francis Place, 1736
(Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)
social phenomenon. The number of people visiting spas for entertainment and leisure far exceeded the number of those who came for purely medical reasons. Often an invalid in search of a cure would be escorted by several members of his family enjoying good health, and only anxious to take advantage of the recreational and social opportunities provided by a spa. Besides assembly rooms, theatres and gaming rooms, each resort offered a range of shops designed to tempt the visitor. Even in the early days of spa-visiting, Celia Fiennes had noted the presence at Tunbridge of

shoppe full of all sorts of toys, silver, china, milliners, and all sorts of curious wooden ware, which this place is noted for.\textsuperscript{14}

From 1735 onwards, Tunbridgeware was sold in great quantities for the tourist market:

Of all these great quantities are sold to the company in the summer, and especially at their leaving the place, when it is customary for them to take Tunbridge fairings to their friends at home.\textsuperscript{15}

noted the author of \textit{The History of Tunbridge Wells} in 1766. In the same year the Reverend Penrose took advantage of his visit to Bath to spend a great deal of money on clothes, new spectacles and various items unobtainable in his native Cornwall.\textsuperscript{16}

In his \textit{Essay towards a Description of Bath} John Wood insisted on the contribution of Bath to the nation's economy:

In effect the City is become a Mart to the whole Country for many miles about it; even to Bristol itself for some Things,\textsuperscript{17}

So, on the eve of the industrial revolution, spas provided employment. They also stimulated craftsmanship as there was a great demand for luxury items. Again it was Bath which became the capital of the luxury trade.

Moreover, artists found a clientele at the spas. Taking advantage of their idle hours, many visitors had their portraits painted in oils or in crayons. As early as 1736, Mrs Barber, Swift's correspondent, expressed in a letter her hopes of seeing her son set himself up in Bath;
My son who is learning to paint goes on well and if he be in the least approved of in all probabilities he may do well at Bath for I never saw a painter that came hither, fail of getting more business than he cou’d do, let him be so indifferent.18

Indeed, Bath was becoming a seedbed of talent: William Hoare painted many of the celebrities of the day. Gainsborough settled there in 1759. The Bath Society of Artists, founded in 1778 by Thomas Beach and Charles Warren, carried on the tradition established earlier in the century. Besides portraiture, there was a school of topographers recording the changing scene of the city in its heyday of architectural development. Bernard Lens and Thomas Robins, Thomas Malton and Claude Nattes were among the most prominent. Views of the city were yet another item offered for sale to the visitors.

Although the contribution of the spas to the nation’s economy was a substantial one, their social contribution was even greater. The daily routine first devised by Beau Nash in Bath allowed people of different rank to meet for the first time on an equal footing, sharing the same premises and the same entertainments. As Nash’s authority was accepted by the aristocracy, the lesser gentry soon followed their example and adopted a more genteel way of behaviour. Nash’s long reign as Master of Ceremonies had a profound influence over several generations of health-seekers. Nor was it restricted to Bath. From 1734 onwards Nash travelled to Tunbridge Wells for the summer season, where his presence was welcome and gave a new impetus to the Kent watering-place. As a consequence other spas sought to acquire in their turn a Master of Ceremonies: Charles Jones, who took up his post in Scarborough in 1740, claimed he had been trained by Nash in Bath.19

By the mid-eighteenth century, spas were losing their exclusiveness and were increasingly frequented by the middle classes, many of them aspiring to gentility. Spas provided an ideal ground for displaying newly-acquired wealth and learning good manners. The perspicacious Elizabeth Montagu could not help noticing the nuances of behaviour of the visitors at Tunbridge:

In the beginning of the season there are people of quality whose behaviour is extremely bourgeois [sic]; at the end of
it, citizens who by their pride and their impertinence think they are behaving like persons of quality: and each by happily deviating from the manners and conduct their condition of life seems to prescribe, meet in the same point of behaviour, and are equally agreeable and well-bred.20

Social intercourse was not just on vertical lines, up and down the social ladder. It also worked on an horizontal plane, bringing together people from different parts of the country. In such microcosms, people from Ireland or from the North of England were able to meet others from the West Country or East Anglia. As marriages were often the outcome of a visit to a watering-place, English society became less provincial, less inbred, less divided into county cliques.

Women were the first beneficiaries of the increasing vogue of spas. Many of them welcomed the opportunity to escape from the boredom of country life, to enjoy the new faces, the gaiety of public assemblies, and to enlarge their circle of acquaintances. Several female characters in literature, from Smollett’s Lydia Melford to Jane Austen’s Catherine Morland, reflect this trend. At Bath, unlike at home, they were not excluded from the company of men or treated as inferior beings by virtue of their sex. They were allowed to participate in every conversation, every outing, every social gathering. Anxious to appear at their best, they became more attentive to their dress, and at the same time more desirous to improve their minds: the success of circulating libraries at watering-places is a well-known fact. Here again Beau Nash played a key role by showing great consideration for women. A mentor to the young and inexperienced; a counsellor and a companion to the more mature such as Lady Bristol, or Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough. A short poem inserted in the Tunbridge Miscellany underlined this trait of Nash’s personality:

“For all our Sex he shows paternal Care,
And lets us see the Dangers we should fear;
Tells us our Foibles in a merry chat,
Which if attended to, improves our Wit.
How greatly we’re obliged to such a Man!
Who strives to make us as charming as he can
Without the view of Interest or Gain.”21
The presence of women had a soothing influence upon manners in general. Men became more couth in their language, more stylish in costume and appearance, less inclined to settle their gambling debts in duels. Much of the elegance and refinement associated with the late eighteenth century was acquired at Bath, Tunbridge, or Scarborough.

Although their influence on manners was enormous, the most lasting contribution of spas to British life proved to be architectural. Successive generations have admired the buildings and design of the spa towns. One thinks of Bath and the unique ensemble designed by the two Woods, with its formal lay-out of square, circle and crescent; of Clifton with its succession of terraces, its spacious squares; of Cheltenham and its Regency balconies, its neo-classical rotundas and colonnades. One also thinks of the harmonious crescent at Buxton designed by Carr of York, the Pantiles at Tunbridge, or in the same town the villas scattered over the Calverley Estate by Decimus Burton.

Here are towns with a profusion of parks and gardens, tree-lined avenues and promenades; here is Rus in Urbe, a foretaste of those garden cities the early twentieth century architects were so anxious to provide. Together with the cathedral cities and university towns, the spas are very much part of the British heritage; they are also places where the quality of life remains, even today, extremely agreeable.

Notes

3 William Turner, A Booke of the Nature and Properties as well as of the Bathes in England and of other in Germany and Italy, very necessary for all sick Persons that cannot be healed without the help of natural Bathe, 1562.
4 Daniel Defoe, A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain, 1724–7.
5 Ibid...
6 A Journey from London to Scarborough in several letters from a Gentleman there to his friend in London together with a list of the Nobility in 1733, 1734.
7 Celia Fiennes, Journeys, op. cit..
8 Daniel Defoe, Tour, op. cit..
9 Ibid..


21 Verses on Mr. Nash by Mrs. W—l—t, *Tunbrigalia or the Tunbridge Miscellany for the year 1737, 1738, 1740*. 