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‘Bertrand’s Toyshop in Bath’. Luxury Retailing 1685-1765

By Vanessa Brett

Review for the History of Bath Research Group.

‘Toys’ in this instance mean small, beautiful items of all sorts and thus for anyone interested in 18th century Bath, the luxury trade and gossip, this book will provide instant gratification, medium term pleasure and a long term reference source of inestimable value. Vanessa Brett takes the commonplace assertions about 18th century Bath as a place of luxury, self indulgent spending and social aspiration and nails them down with facts. Brett populates the book with names, faces, interrelationships and business connections in early 18th century Bath, in a way that previously has not been achieved.

Paul Bertrand, a goldsmith, is brought back to life and placed in a part of Bath that most modern authors undervalue but this is no parish pump history. Bertrand and other much better known Bath names are stitched together not only into the rest of the City but into national trading and social contexts of the time. Brett’s own encyclopaedic knowledge of silver and precious objects is revealed in large numbers of pictures of exquisite merchandise rarely illustrated and which collectors will relish. Her pursuit of original archival material outside Bath even reveals pieces documented as being bought in Bath from Bertrand in the 1740s. The attempt to follow up the 900 people who appear as entries in Bertrand’s archived accounts at Hoare’s Bank in London is a Herculean task that few would have undertaken. The highly successful result, however, firmly underwrites Brett’s subject and opens up almost endless questions and perspectives for researchers and collectors of all sorts.

The City’s own splendid collections at the Victoria Art Gallery, the Mineral Water Hospital, the Guildhall, and in the Bath Archives, and accounts of the resident artists and craftsmen of the 18th century all find their places. Mike Chapman’s re-drawing of the maps of the area of Terrace Walk help the author to locate the Bertrand family, their properties and their important near neighbours in the Georgian city of Bath, a market place growing at breakneck speed. A new understanding of the ownership and business links of the lower assembly rooms is revealed, with a useful time line appearing in one of the very informative special information panels that appear throughout the book. The theatre, amusements, gambling, science, manufacturing and the high value placed by rich people on luxury possessions all emerge and faces are revealed that have rarely or never been shown before in Bath history books.

Michael Rowe.

Chairman HBRG.

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