



NEWSLETTER 14

JANUARY 1991

GROUP NEWS

MEETINGS HELD OCTOBER - DECEMBER 1990

On 3 October John Ede launched the Group's fifth full season with a knowledgeable talk on heraldry illustrated by copious slides and coloured drawings. Although many coats of arms must have been lost from local buildings over the centuries, plenty of heraldic evidence, often overlooked, does survive. In Sydney Place, for example, the carved devices of the Vane family have been restored after weathering. In Camden Crescent the elephant motifs over the doors derive from the arms of the Pratts. Lansdown House carries the crowned heart of the Bruce, Bellot's Hospital the Cecil arms, a battlemented gateway behind Springfield Place three probable martlets - the symbol of William Beckford. The external stonework, doors and interior of the Abbey are rich in heraldry, while more recent buildings, from schools to public houses, also furnish examples. At Bath Fire Station the supporters are helmets and hoses. The University's arms include a steam-engine's governor. Kingswood School uses a spurious cockleshell motif, a Victorian invention. The city of Bath's own shield was long problematic, until at last in 1970 the order of the two devices, walls and water, was officially transposed to its pre-Stuart form. John Ede wound up an illuminating presentation by showing the evolution of the Royal Arms (which until 1800 still included a quartering of fleurs de lys, a visual declaration of a claim on the French throne). He then traced the development in actual painted and carved heraldry still to be seen in dozens of churches in the Bath area, from a vigorous Elizabethan piece at Beckington down to Victorian cast-iron and even modern polystyrene.

At the appropriate venue of Manvers Street Baptist Church, Kerry Birch spoke on 7 November about the Baptists of Georgian Bath. A nucleus had met privately in the city since the 1740s but the local meeting was properly established only in 1752 when nine members transferred from the Broadmead congregation in Bristol. Under their unpaid minister Robert Parsons, who continued his trade as an ornamental stone mason, their belief was Calvinistic and their discipline strict. By 1762 their membership had risen to 40, and by 1771 to 81, without counting the many "hearers" who attended meetings, especially during the Bath season. In 1768, having outgrown their premises in Horse Street, they removed to nearby Gerrard Street (later renamed Somerset Street, parallel to the Quay) and three years later began to use a plot near the Walcot turnpike house for a burial ground. Their numbers kept on growing, reaching 118 members by 1795 and over twice as many by 1815 - among them many respected Bath families. In 1797 and again in 1816 they hosted Baptist Association gatherings. Robert Parsons died in 1791 but when the Rev. John Paul Porter succeeded him as minister (now a paid appointment) rather than Parson's son Thomas, the latter decamped to the Independents at Argyle Chapel. Porter's more popular style (which allowed cheerful music into Sunday worship) had its critics, but the congregation increased despite other Dissenting competition. A Sunday school opened in 1812. Meanwhile other Baptist meetings sprang up in and around Bath; Kerry Birch has identified as many as 30, though some were short-lived. His slides - which rounded off a very informative talk - showed former locations and present survivals of buildings, as well as details from manuscript records and other memorabilia. It seems that Baptists wielded real influence in Victorian Bath.

For sane it was history-within-living-memory when Niall Rothnie spoke on 6 December about the impact of the Second World War on Bath. Beyond the usual wartime hardships the city was affected in two particular ways. Since it was deemed to be in 'C' category and safe from attack, it received many evacuees. At the outbreak of war these included children from London's East End and Admiralty personnel moving fruit London at two days' notice into requisitioned buildings. Subsequent evacuees came from the Channel Isles and, during the V1 and V2 campaign, again from London. Bath was a generally welcoming city, whatever the Daily Mail and other national papers claimed to the contrary. More traumatically, it also suffered direct bombing in reprisal for the Allies' strike against the historic city of Lubeck. Stray enemy planes from raids on Bristol had twice already jettisoned bombs over Bath, killing people at Twerton and Widcombe. But the raids on the nights of 25 and 26 April 1941 were in earnest. Niall Rothnie gave a graphic description of those two nights, when c.400 high-explosive bombs and ten times as many incendiaries showered on the city. Oldfield Park, Kingsmead and Julian Road were among areas badly damaged. The gasworks, Stothert and Pitt's main building, and the Assembly Rooms, went up in flames. The recently reorganised fire services, and firewatching teams plagued by absenteeism, could hardly cope. Around 400 people died, some in public air-raid shelters. Well over 1000 houses were destroyed or pulled down later, and most of the rest lost windows and slates. Expecting another raid, many Bathonians trekked out of the city for the next night, but the Luftwaffe had switched to other Baedeker targets. Rumours abounded, often hardening into myths that are still current, as Niall Rothnie discovered in dozens of interviews with survivors. But his was a carefully sifted account, rich in curious vignettes: a machine-gun nest at the Holburne Museum; voyeurism of corpses in St. James's crypt; opportunist looting from Mitchell's drapery shop. And it ended with a salutary reminder of what Bath might have suffered in post-war reconstruction: the drastic Abercrombie plan.

NEW MEMBERS

Mr. David A. Crellin,	Glenbrook, Claremont Road, Bath.	BA1 6LX
Mr. & Mrs. J.P.Lowin,	9 Brunswick Street, Bath.	BA1 6PQ
Mr. & Mrs. Simon Morray-Jones,	10 Brunswick Street, Bath.	BA1 6PQ

ANGUS BUCHANAN

Rather belatedly the Group offers Angus its warm congratulations on his appointment to a personal chair at the University of Bath.

SOURCES WORKING PARTY

Data files are now held by the Bath Record Office, Bath Public Library and 4 Circus (Bath Museum Service and Bath Archaeological Trust). Since the last report (Newsletter 12) sheets have been added for:-

Bath City Council, Department of Environmental Services
(Building Control Section and Conservation and Planning Section)

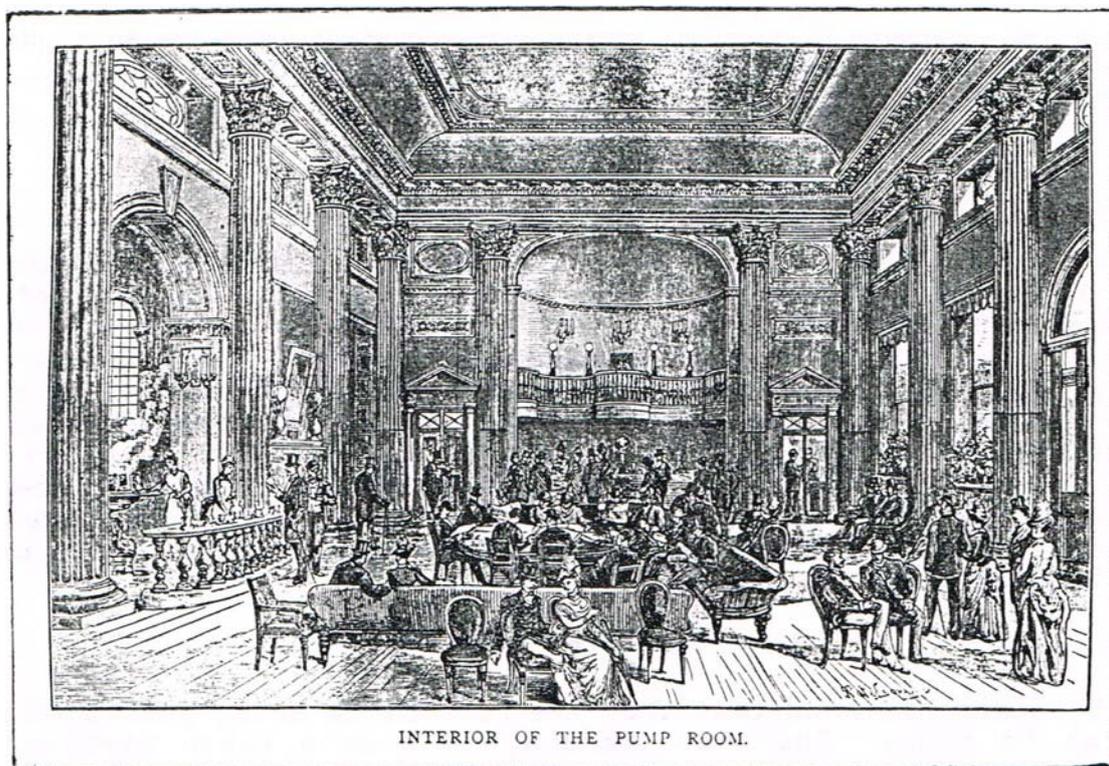
Bath Festival Society
City of Bath College of Further Education (Open Learning Centre)
Kingswood School
The Royal School
South-Western Electricity Board
Victoria Art Gallery
Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society

A V O N C O U N T Y L I B R A R Y

Many members will now have used the new Library at the Podium during the three months it has been open. Any opinions about it, and especially on its improved or diminished value for local history research, should be sent to the Secretary by 31 January for consideration by the History Group's committee.

R E C E N T P U B L I C A T I O N S

1. M.C. and R.R. Battestin, Henry Fielding (London, Routledge, 1989). A definitive biography that also traces Fieldings's local associations.
2. D. Cantor, "The contradictions of specialization: rheumatism and the decline of the spa in inter-war Britain", Medical History suppl. no. 10 (1990), 127-144. Useful background for Bath spa during the 1920s and 1930s.
3. Penelope Corfield, "Georgian Bath: the magical meeting place", History Today vol. 40 (Nov. 1990) 26-33. Covers similar ground to her talk to the History Group in March 1988.
4. Phyllis Hembry, The English Spa, 1560 - 1815 (London, Athlone P., 1990). The first volume of an intended two (carrying the story down to 1914), this will certainly become the modern standard work on spas. If it is oddly weak on medical aspects, the development, proliferation and social history of spas are covered in detail. About a third of the text is devoted to Bath, beginning with its deliberate promotion (along with Buxton) by the Elizabethan government to counter would-be Catholic plotters who might otherwise have had the pretext to gather at Spa. Elizabethan and Stuart patronage is altogether well-treated - as might be expected from a writer who had already done her homework for a previous book, The Bishops of Bath and Wells, 1540-1640 (1974). The sections on Georgian Bath are thorough, with only minor errors, based on a close reading of the printed literature (especially R.S. Neale), Corporation records, and a variety of primary sources (some previously untapped). A perceptive book, not to be ignored, though hardly cheap at £35.
5. Victoria Art Gallery, William Hoare of Bath, R.A., 1707-1792, catalogue by Evelyn Newby of the exhibition held **3** November - 8 December 1990.



From Rambles about Bath and its Neighbourhood, 1889

WHERE IN BATH DID THE ANGLO-SAXON ABBEY STAND?

A seminar organised by Elizabeth Holland to discuss this question was held on 24 October. It opened with Dr. G.A. Kellaway summarising his work on pre-Roman local topography, with special reference to the areas of the Bath site liable to flooding (namely, up to the 18-metre contour). Mike Chapman then outlined his and Elizabeth Holland's case for the Saxon abbey to have occupied a site between present-day Bath Street and Westgate Street, within the ancient district of Bimberry - where the Saxon nucleus of Bath may indeed have stood. Their argument had several strands but rested largely on: the discovery in 1867 of a 2-light, stone, Saxon fenest(r)ella (reliquary window) on the suggested site; the presence of a thick layer of stone dust and chippings, just above the Roman level, from the local working of building stone; the early disruption of the original Saxon street plan which still exists north of Westgate Street; suggestive property boundaries; and the improbability of the 8th-century founders preferring low-lying, flood-prone, perhaps marshy ground. John of Tours' Norman abbey, it was argued, needed to be laid out on a new, less-restricted site because of its ambitious scale. Peter Davenport, for Bath Archaeological Trust, presented the more traditional view that, on balance, the Saxon abbey must have stood fairly close to the site of the present Abbey church or even beneath it. Archaeological excavations north of Bath Street did not point to a Saxon abbey in the vicinity, and the level at which the fenestella had turned up was unrecorded. On the other hand, various Saxon artefacts and burials were known from near the Abbey church, and here too were Roman foundations which would have raised any Saxon construction above flood danger - though at Winchester and Norwich the Saxons had built on the flood plain anyway. Comparisons with other places showed that the Normans generally built their abbeys directly over any Saxon predecessors, or - as at Wells - very close by. The ensuing discussion touched on the problematic evidence from early charters, the continuity or otherwise of the abbey between the 7th and 10th centuries, the rather crude workmanship of the fenestella, the potential of microscopic analysis of stone samples, the frequent loss of Saxon levels of Bath through later clellaring, and the likelihood that some Roman walls still stood which the Saxons could utilise (cf. the Anglo-Saxon poem fragment, The Ruin). The matter will be finally settled only by fresh evidence, either archival (a dubious prospect) or archaeological - perhaps by eventual excavations around or under the Abbey church. The Holland-Chapman thesis is expanded in The Story of the White Hart Inn, Vol. 1. Peter Davenport has discussed the history of the Bath History, Vol. 2.

COMMEMORATING THE CHARTER OF 1590

In September a small exhibition to mark the quartercentenary was assembled by Colin Johnston in the Guildhall foyer. The charter itself had pride of place, and prominent among the contextual display was Marta Inskip's meticulous plan of Bath in 1590, showing each property boundary and the chief types of land-ownership. Copies of material shown on the exhibition panels were also distributed in individual packs to juniors at Bath schools; each pack contained as well a colouring chart of Elizabethan life, a badge, and a special issue of the Evening Chronicle dated 13 September 1590 using text and ideas provided by Jean Manco. Children at infant schools received a badge and a commemorative mug. Finally, beginning 13 November, a series of weekly lunchtime lectures (by John Wroughton, Stephen Clews, Trevor Fawcett and Graham Davis) tackled in turn the subject of Bath in 1590, 1690, 1790 and 1890.

- o 0 o- o 0 o- o0 o- 00 o- 00 0-00 o-

Members are reminded that they are welcome to bring guests to meetings from time to time. The understanding is that a token payment of 50p. should be made for each guest attending a meeting.

The Newsletter is compiled by the Secretary and typed by Judith Samuel.