

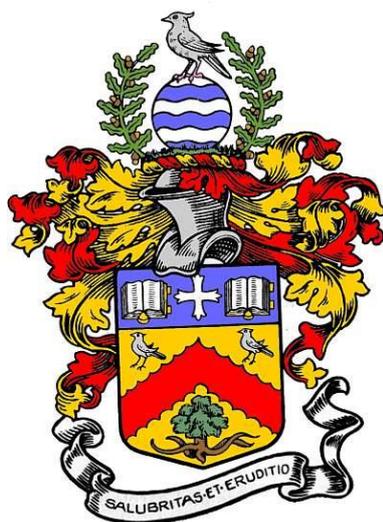
Cheltenham – a spa town

WHAT IS A SPA?

The earliest spas were places you could visit to ‘take the waters’. Before the days of piped water, people got their supply from wells dug into the ground, or sometimes from springs, where water emerged naturally from an underground source. Often, this water picked up salts from the rocks beneath, and sometimes these mineral salts were believed to help cure illnesses. Their strong taste made people think the waters must be doing them good, and they were prepared to travel some distance to try them. Doctors analysed the waters and said which illnesses they would help. Many spas became popular not just for their water, but also for the company of other visitors. One of the first places where people went to ‘take the waters’ in this way was the town of Spa in Belgium, which is the origin of the word.

WHEN DID CHELTENHAM BECOME A SPA?

Cheltenham’s special waters were discovered in 1716, when local people noticed pigeons pecking at salt crystals round the edge of a small spring in a field at Bayshill. This was a sign that the spring water had minerals in it, and people who drank it found that it had a beneficial effect on their insides. William Mason bought the field and dug a well so that the waters could be reached more easily. As word of the Cheltenham spa waters spread, more and more visitors came. Well-to-do people, eager to try the latest discovery, came long distances, but Cheltenham was still a small town and there were few places for them to stay, and there was not much in the way of entertainment.



All this changed in 1738, when Henry Skillicorne, a retired sea captain who had married William Mason’s daughter Elizabeth, came to Cheltenham. He had seen a successful spa in Bristol and knew he could make Cheltenham’s successful too. He set about making pleasant walks around the well and giving visitors more ways to pass their time while they were here. Cheltenham became fashionable. More and more people came, and more wells were dug in different parts of the town to satisfy the demand for mineral waters. Cheltenham’s big moment was in 1788, when King George III, who was often unwell, came to take the waters. He brought his whole family, staying for five weeks – a great honour for the town. The royal visit boosted Cheltenham’s fame even more, and the

town grew steadily, right into the 1800s. Even today, there are pigeons on Cheltenham's official coat of arms, to mark their importance in the town's history.

WHEN DID PITTVILLE SPA OPEN?



Figure 1. *The Cheltenham Royal Spa Well at Bayshill, about 1740* Image courtesy of the Wilson

Most of the first wells were on the south side of town, at Bayshill, Montpellier and Cambray. This changed in the 1820s, when an ambitious man, Joseph Pitt, decided to set out a big new estate on the north side. It was soon named Pittville, after him. Besides ornamental gardens, lakes and gravelled walks, its main attraction was the grand Pump Room. It opened in 1830. Here you could take a glass of Pittville's own mineral water, and here, under the domed roof with its chandelier, there were dances, flower shows and other entertainments.

DO PEOPLE STILL DRINK SPA WATER?



During the 20th century, many medical advances were made. People lost faith in mineral water cures. They began to rely on new medicines and treatments. Instead of spending time in towns like Cheltenham, sipping spa water and chatting with other visitors, they started taking holidays abroad. Some of the mineral wells had started to dry up or get polluted. In Cheltenham, there is only one place where you can still get spa water, and that is at the Pittville Pump Room. Today, an electric pump brings it up from deep underground. Unlike the mineral water you buy in bottles, the Pittville spa water still has a salty taste, and not many people want more than one glass.

Figure 2. *The pump at Pittville Pump Room*

QUESTIONS

1. Where in Pittville can you see the Cheltenham Borough coat of arms? How many pigeons can you see? What else does the coat of arms depict?
2. What sort of people took the waters in Regency times? And who didn't and for what reasons?
3. Why don't people take the waters anymore? What do they do instead?
4. Sample the spa water at Pittville Pump Room. What does it taste like?
5. Try and find the image of the Bayshill spa at the Wilson (clue – it is on an object that a lady might have used).

References

'A bottled history of Cheltenham waters' by James Hodsdon, available at the Cheltenham Local Studies Library.

Pittville Pump Room 1825-1980 by Steven Blake (1980), available from Friends of Pittville.

The English Spa 1560-1815 by Phyllis Hembry (Continuum International Publishing Group, 1989).