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A Brief History of Harrogate



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1571 William Slingsby of Bilton Park discovered the Tewit Well and declared that the spring waters had health giving properties, similar to the waters in the spas of Belgium.

Travellers began to make diversions to visit the Spa located in High Harrogate.

1631 A second well was discovered close to the Tewit Well by Michael Stanhope. This well was a 'chalybeate' or 'iron spring'.

1660 The town of Harrogate Spa rapidly expanded.

1663 The first public bathing house was built. By the end of the Century there were 20.

High Harrogate was more fashionable than Low Harrogate and it is here that the first hotels were located.

1695 Low Harrogate's Sulphur Well (known as 'The Stinking Spaw') became fashionable and was thought to have fantastic health-giving properties and medical cures.

1700 Harrogate was well established as a Spa and doctors had produced leaflets about the qualities of the waters.

88 springs were found altogether - 36 in Valley Gardens.

1778 The Enclosure Act for the Forest of Knaresborough ensured that the public wells would remain accessible by persuading Parliament to leave 200 acres of the forest, which included the principal springs, unenclosed. The Stray - as the area was, and still is, known as - is an invaluable asset to Harrogate.

Water from the Spa was bathed in as well as drunk.

- 1969 The Royal Baths closed for all treatments except the Turkish Baths and Harrogate ceased to be a spa in the true sense of the word.
- 1977 The film 'Agatha' with Dustin Hoffman and Vanessa Redgrave was made at the Old Swan Hotel and in Harrogate.
- 1981 The Harrogate International Conference Centre was opened.
- 1988 The BBC filmed Alan Bennett at the Crown Hotel for his observation of life series "Dinner At Noon".
- 1992 Victoria Shopping Centre opens. Designed by architect David Cullen. The design was inspired by Palladio's Basilica at Vicenza.
- 1998 Her Majesty the Queen visits to open the restored Sun Pavilion reflecting the 'Art Deco' period in the Grade II listed Valley Gardens.
- 1999 New Hydro Swimming Pool opens , with 3 swimming pools and the Brimham Fitness Centre
- 2003 New Contemporary ' Hotel du Vin' opens.
- 2008 HRH the Prince of Wales, Prince Charles visits to open the newly restored 'Kursaal' (Royal Hall), saying 'It is once again the palace of glittering gold that it was in 1903'.

- 1805 The Promenade Inn was built and then opened in 1806. The building was paid for by public subscription and was used as a meeting place for people to make "polite conversation" after taking the waters. This building was also used a theatre, where in 1884, Lilli Langtry (Mistress of Edward VII) performed "School for Scandal". Oscar Wilde also gave a lecture here on dress. This building is now the Mercer Art Gallery.
- 1806 Lord Byron stayed at the Crown Hotel. There is now a plaque outside to commemorate his visit.
- 1835 Jonathan Shutt Junior, owner of the Old Swan Hotel, discovered that his neighbour Joseph Thackwray, manager of the Crown Hotel, intended to build a well, yielding sulphur water and drain the flow of the public well. He already owned private wells and private bathing establishments.
- 1841 Because of this terrible act and other acts of vandalism to the wells, the Harrogate Improvements Act of 1841 was approved. Local senior citizens and local hoteliers petitioned for an Act of Parliament to create a body of Improvement Commissioners to ensure that nobody pirated the precious waters
- 1842 Isaac Thomas Shutt was the last of the Shutts to own the Old Swan Hotel. He was a trained architect and surveyor. His plans were used for the design of the new Royal Pump Room Museum, to house the old Sulphur Well.
- 1840s The first railway terminus was built in Harrogate, enabling more visitors to come to the town.

1878 The Old Swan Hotel was sold to the Harrogate Hydropathic Company, who planned to build on the site a replica of Dr Smedley's Hydropathic in Matlock, Derbyshire.

The Harrogate Hydropathic had 200 bedrooms, a dining room for 300 'patients', coal fires in every bedroom and hot and cold running water.

Dr Veale came from Cornwall to Harrogate to develop Hydropathic cures. Bathing at the Hotel was only in the new suite of medicinal baths. WC's had extractor fans to combat sulphured hydrogen fumes.

Dr Veale was the first resident doctor at the Harrogate Hydropathic. He instigated strict control over diet, baths, exercise, massage and careful water drinking, which appealed strongly to the Victorian masochistic instincts.

The Harrogate Hydropathic was believed to be the first building in Harrogate to be lit by electricity.

1897 The Royal Baths, opened by HRH The Duke of Cambridge, was the most advanced centre for hydrotherapy in the world. The medicinal baths employed bath attendants and masseurs and facilities offered included Turkish Baths, rest cubicles, Vichy douches and electric shock baths.

The Harrogate Hydropathic began to be known as the Swan Hydro. It was the first of Harrogate's hydropathic establishments. Imitations followed but the Swan Hydro was the most successful.

Doctors at this time made their daily rounds of the hotels in a top hat, frockcoat and spats.

1903 The Royal Hall opened, originally named 'Kursaal', a fashionable German term for a spa assembly hall, before the First World War. Conceived and designed as a 'Cure Hall' and created by Britain's greatest theatre designer, Frank Matcham and is the only one built by him.

1914-1918 The First World War changed the fortunes of the town and the depression of the 30's accelerated the decline in Spa treatment.

1926 The missing novelist, Agatha Christie, was found at The Old Swan Hotel (Harrogate Hydropathic as it was known then). Overwork had induced a breakdown and a poster at Waterloo Railway Station advertising Harrogate had made Agatha travel to the town.

1927 Sir Edward Elgar last visited Harrogate when he stayed at the Majestic Hotel. A walk has been named after him in the Valley Gardens. There is also a plaque in the gardens in memory of his stay.

1939-1945 During the Second World War various hotels were acquisitioned by Government Departments and many ministerial departments were evacuated to Harrogate.

1940s "Mr Harrogate" (Bill Baxter) re-created the town as a conference centre. In 1959 a 'temporary' exhibition hall was created on the Spa Rooms Gardens.

1960s It is traditional for the toy industry to meet in January. Manchester and Leeds could not accommodate the industry, so Geoffrey Wright, the Manager at the Old Swan Hotel, said that his nursery could be used as a stock room (other hotels had said no to this request). The Old Swan Hotel secured Harrogate International Toy Fair for the town.