

City of Bath

One of the highlights of the Mechanics Worldwide 09 Conference was the visit to the Guildhall. Delegates were able to see the ballroom with its exquisite chandeliers as well as the Mayor's Parlour, which contained memorabilia of Bath and where the present Mayor invited us for tea and coffee. Afterwards we heard an outstanding lecture on Bath from Mr Stephen Bird who is the Director of Cultural Heritage in the City. It is hoped that the following article written by Peter Ford and other members of the BRLSI captures some of the flavour of that lecture

It is the existence of hot mineral springs which has given rise to much of the history of Bath and indeed for its very existence. Since the dawn of humanity, springs, pools and lakes are frequently associated with the spirit world and the existence of deities and Bath is no exception. The first person who is associated with what became Bath is a shadowy and very possibly mythical person called Prince Bladud, who is believed to have lived during the Bronze Age, well before the Roman Occupation. According to legend Bladud contracted leprosy and as such was dismissed from his father's Court. He became a swineherd in the locality where many of his pigs also contracted the disease. However, the pigs were cured by wallowing in a hot and steamy muddy area. Bladud decided to do the same and also became cured allowing him to return home to Court. Later he founded a small settlement in this region which later became Bath and there is evidence of a Pre-Roman wooden temple dedicated to the female deity Sul, a goddess of healing. In 2009 during our Conference Bladud was commemorated by the placing of many brightly coloured life size model pigs throughout the main part of the City. During the Bronze and Iron Ages the local communities were rural and largely nomadic although there might well have also been small communities on some of the seven hills which surround present day Bath. There is evidence of Iron Age forts on Solsbury Hill at Claverton Down and also at Bathampton.

Although Julius Caesar attempted to invade the British Isles in 55BC and again a year later, the Roman occupation did not really take place until AD 43 with the conquest by Claudius. Thus large parts of the British Isles came under the jurisdiction of Rome and formed part of a huge empire extending for much of present day North Africa, the Near East and Europe. Small settled communities began to appear and London, with its navigable river, became the hub and was the centre for supplies and communications. Other smaller communities were established such as those at Cirencester, Verulamium (present day St Albans), Chester, Lincoln and York. These were linked to London by a superb network of Roman roads along which chariots and the army could move rapidly. Initially the Roman Legions probably stumbled upon Bath, which was on a bend of the river Avon, derived from the Celtic word Afon meaning river, and close to the ancient track known as the Fosse Way, linking Exeter in the South West to Lincoln in the East Midlands. Present day Bath came to be known as Aquae Sulis. For tired legionnaires, far

from home, it must have been a delight to be able to bathe in the hot springs which they found there. They built up a large complex of temples and baths. The Romans had a fairly relaxed approach to the deities, provided that such worship did not foment rebellion. They were happy to allow the existing Celtic deity Sul to live side by side with their own deity Minerva, who was the Roman goddess of wisdom and healing. Many artefacts from the temples and baths can be seen in the excellent Roman Baths Museum. Coins recovered from the baths suggest that they were mainly built during the reign of Emperor Nero (54-69 AD). Parts of the original baths can be visited today together with its feeder lead pipes still intact. A popular item in the museum is the famous carved Gorgon's Head, which was once on top of the portico of the temple of Sul-Minerva. This has subsequently become the logo for the University of Bath. The Romans were good at trying to integrate the existing population, which they gave rise to a large number of Romano-British citizens. Much of the everyday conversation was carried out in the local dialect while the Roman language was reserved for official occasions and documents. For wealthy citizens it must have been a very pleasant existence although the whole of the Roman Empire depended upon slavery so that there was a huge disenfranchised under class. The Romans left around 410 AD, when Rome itself began to implode. After this the infrastructure that they had created in the British Isles slowly began to decline and Britain entered the so called "Dark Ages", characterised by a great deal of fighting between Celts, Danes and Saxons. However this period saw the development of Christianity in Britain and scholarship within the monasteries, especially in the production of beautifully illuminated manuscripts. Archaeological digs have brought to light many outstanding gold and silver artefacts and these have suggested that large parts of Britain were much more developed and sophisticated than was once thought. It also suggests that there was a considerable amount of trade taking place with other countries.

A turning point in British history was the Norman Conquest – 1066 and all that. There is no doubt that they changed much of the face of the country not least in their building of many castles and fortresses and the development of London as the Capital City. By this time Bath had become fairly insignificant although it did have a large and important monastery as will be described later. Virtually nothing remains of Norman and Medieval Bath except for a small section of the City Wall, which has been heavily restored, as has "Sally Lunn's" house said to be the oldest house in the City and dating from 1482. However, many street names of the time still exist such as Westgate, Southgate, Upper and Lower Borough Walls, Cross Street, Stall Street and Cheap Street, the word "Cheap" meaning market. The wool and cloth industries were important components of the Bath economy and some people became very wealthy as a result. Among these would have been Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Dame Alison. Fulling mills, which beat the cloth into a solid and durable material suitable for clothing, existed all along the River Avon and its tributaries. This was a noisy, dirty and smelly process but was lucrative for the mill owners. Like almost all places in England, Bath suffered the effects of the Black Death, which reduced the population of the country to about half of what it was. This gave rise to a great deal of social unrest and realignment of wealth.

The earlier developments continued during the Tudor and Stuart period. By Tudor times Bath residents were complaining about the deleterious effect on the City of filthy streets,

drunkenness, beggars and football hooligans – things which many residents complain about today! However, the streets were truly filthy with open sewers running down their centre, which were filled with excrement, discarded food and animal carcasses. In this era sheep, goats and cattle were regularly driven into the centre of the city contributing greatly to the general mess. The stench during a hot summer must have been truly awful. The “sturdy beggar” who would often roam in groups and terrorise a neighbourhood was a problem experienced by many towns and cities at that time as was the football matches of apprentices which were often little more than mass fights. Drunkenness has been an urban problem throughout the world for centuries.

Although the Roman Baths had decayed they did still exist and improvements to them were carried out during the Stuart Period. They began to attract Royalty and other important personages because of the widely believed curative properties of the water. Anne of Denmark, the wife of James I, came here in 1616 in order to find a cure for dropsy. The physician of Charles II recommended the waters on medical grounds both to be drunk and bathed in. Mary of Modena, the wife of James II, spent some time here in 1687 in order to take the waters in the hope of becoming pregnant. She succeeded although it is not clear to what extent one could attribute this to the waters. The following year Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist, also visited the baths and enjoyed the experience although he commented that “it cannot be clean to go so many bodies together in the same water”. Progress in the development of the baths was halted during the English Civil War (1642-49). In 1643 there was the inconclusive battle of Lansdown some three miles out of Bath between the Royalist and Parliamentary troops. The Parliamentary army retreated back into Bath under the cover of darkness. Some vandalism to the Abbey took place at this time and the defacing of the statues to both St Peter and St Paul, which are situated either side of the West Door, can still be seen today.

Joseph Gilmore from Bristol produced an important map of Bath in 1694, which showed many of the important buildings which were then in existence. It is significant in that it shows what Bath looked like almost immediately prior to the City undergoing significant development during the Georgian Period, which has given rise to much of the glories of present day Bath and is an important reason why it attracts thousands of tourists to the City each year.

Bath has been an important centre for Christian Worship for many centuries. In 2009 Bath Abbey celebrated the 1100th anniversary of the foundation of the diocese of Bath and Wells. A continuous line of Christian activity on the present site of Bath Abbey can be traced back to 675 AD and this may well have been going on for some centuries beforehand. It was in that year that a certain King Osric granted land to Abbess Bertana in order to build a convent. This was adjacent to the by then decaying Roman Baths, which must have provided a useful source of building material. As was often the case in those days, it is believed that a “double house” was created in that there was separate accommodation for both men and women presided over by an abbess. By 757 AD it appears that the nunnery had died out leaving what became known as the monastery of St. Peter in Bath. A very important event took place in Bath in 973 AD when Edgar, who was descended from King Alfred the Great, was crowned the first King of all England in

the Abbey church. By then the religious community at the abbey consisted of Benedictine monks who by that time had become widespread throughout England. Bath was an excellent location for such a coronation. For many centuries the River Avon was the boundary between the two kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex and it was traditional that important events such as charters and treaties were held on such borders. In addition, Bath was an important junction for ancient tracks between the Midlands and Northumbria down to the Mendips and the West Country and also between the Thames Valley and the Severn Valley. In those days the River Avon was navigable allowing many dignitaries and sightseers to attend the event. By all accounts the coronation was a glittering occasion and it has formed the basis of coronations ever since. It took place on Whit Sunday and has been commemorated ever since. In 1973 our present Queen Elisabeth II attended a service commemorating the 1000th anniversary of the crowning of the first King of all England as can be seen by an inscription in the floor of the Abbey.

The Norman Conquest by William Duke of Normandy in 1066 is a decisive event in the history of the British Isles. He became William I and began the Norman line of English Kings, who at the same time possessed extensive lands in Normandy and other regions of present day France. He was succeeded in 1087 by his son William II (William Rufus) who the following year appointed a highly capable person, John de Villula, as Bishop of Bath. Before becoming ordained, John de Villula had been one of the physicians to William Rufus. He took a great interest in the healing properties of the hot springs in Bath and did much to improve their facilities. His appointment ushered in a new era in the life of the Abbey. He set about replacing the Saxon Abbey with a much larger Normandy one, which was substantially larger than the present abbey. For the next four hundred years Bath became an important monastic city. The monasteries played an important role in English life. Not only were they major centres for religious observance, they also were centres of scholarship and learning. Many of the religious manuscripts which exist today were meticulously produced in the monasteries. In addition they provided healing for the sick, the giving of alms for the poor and needy and were a stop over and resting place for travellers who could also obtain food and sustenance. Some monks and lay people who worked on the land and tended the ponds produced much needed food for the community.

This fairly stable situation which lasted for several centuries slowly began to decline and towards the end of the fifteenth century it had become clear that the buildings were in a very bad state of repair and the life of many of the monks in the Abbey had greatly degenerated. It was into this environment that Oliver King became Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1496. He was to have as important influence on Bath Abbey as did John de Villula some four hundred years earlier.

In 1499 he had a dream, depicted on the West Front of the Abbey, of angels ascending and descending a ladder between an olive tree and a crown. This he interpreted as a divine command that he should rebuild the Abbey. Work began almost immediately and an imposing building began to be constructed. It transpired that it was the last great English church to be built before the break with Rome and is at the pinnacle of the English Perpendicular style of architecture. It was also one of the earliest churches to

have the imposing fan vaulting which can still be seen today. It was constructed by the brothers Robert and William Vertue who were also involved in similar vaulting in Henry VII Chapel at Westminster Abbey and St George's Chapel Windsor.

Christian life in England changed dramatically during the reign of King Henry VIII between 1509 and 1547. Henry's break with Rome was brought about by his all consuming desire to produce a male heir. It became increasingly clear that his wife Katherine of Aragon was unlikely to produce such an heir and in the meantime Henry had fallen in love with Anne Boleyn, one of her courtiers. In order to annul his marriage to Katherine, Henry had to obtain a dispensation from the Pope which was not forthcoming. This led Henry to dispense with the Pope and form his own church, where religious services were carried out in English, and were based on the Book of Common Prayer, instead of the Latin of the Catholic faith. Henry also required huge sums of money to build up the navy and improve England's defences against the expected onslaught from the staunchly Catholic country of Spain. Through his right hand man, Thomas Cromwell, he assessed the wealth of each of the monasteries and this resulted in their dissolution with Henry acquiring their wealth. This had a devastating effect on many communities throughout the country not least on the monks and abbots who had to leave their secure environment. The monastery at Bath was dissolved in 1539 and the Abbey building again began to fall badly into disrepair. The situation was rescued by Bishop James Montague, another important prelate in the history of the Abbey. Through his efforts the building of the Abbey was finally completed and his imposing tomb can be seen today in the nave. Montague oversaw the construction of an outstanding building. It has a remarkably large window area allowing the sunshine to come streaming through the building. It was this that led to the Abbey being referred to as the "Lantern of the West".

For the next two centuries the Abbey underwent little further construction. Important restorations were carried out in the nineteenth century, notably by Sir Gilbert Scott, who renovated many churches as well as building the Albert Memorial in Kensington Gardens in London and St Pancras Station. Since then, there has not been a major change in the appearance of the Abbey although there is a constant programme of cleaning, renovating and improving both its fabric and facilities. The Abbey continues to play an important role in the life of the city.

The thousands of tourists who come to Bath each year are attracted by the Roman Baths, the Abbey and above all the outstanding Georgian Architecture and its associations with Jane Austin. It has also become a very popular shopping destination, which in addition to the normal high street stores has many interesting and unusual shops catering for niche markets, as well as an excellent selection of pubs, restaurants and night clubs.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century Queen Anne came to Bath to take the waters and this ushered in a period when Bath suddenly became the fashionable place to visit. People came here for the health properties of the hot springs as well as a place to meet friends, gossip, gamble, indulge in dancing or find a husband or wife. This social activity centred on the Baths, the Pump Room and the Assembly Rooms. Many of the Georgian

crescents, squares and terraces which exist today were built to cater for this influx of tourists. It was to control this socialising that the colourful and raffish Beau Nash was appointed by the Bath Corporation to act as Master of Ceremonies. He was without doubt both a snob and an eccentric, and became a figure of fun, but he had a very pragmatic approach laying down strict laws as to dress code and as to how people should generally behave and conduct themselves. He achieved quite a large amount of good by persuading the Bath Corporation to repair the roads, install pavements and street lighting, clean the place up and prevent duelling and the wearing of swords within the City. Nash finally died in poverty in 1761 and out of recognition for his work the Bath Corporation gave him a magnificent funeral and today there is a wall plaque to his memory in Bath Abbey. His long time mistress, Juliana Papjoy, left Bath shortly afterwards and the house in which she lived is now a well known and popular restaurant next door to the Theatre Royal.

The person best associated with the superb Georgian architecture is John Wood, who together with his son also called John, designed and built many of the most loved and visited parts of the city. Wood drew his inspiration from Andrea Palladio a 16th century architect who was based in Vicenza. Palladio's designs harked back to the symmetry and harmony of the Roman period and Wood came to Bath from Yorkshire in the hope of building a Palladian inspired part of the city. The region that he had in mind was both to the north west and north east of the city on land which was owned by a highly successful London surgeon and MP for Bath called Robert Gay. At first, Gay strongly supported Wood but this became less so as the delays in implementing Wood's grand designs for rebuilding the city began to take place. Nevertheless Wood was a most persistent individual and, despite opposition, work on his schemes slowly began to start and eventually come into fruition. He was responsible for Queen Square which he completed in 1736. Today, the north side of the square in particular is almost the same as Wood originally designed it. The Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution, where the Mechanics Worldwide 2009 meeting was held, is on the west side. This has been quite largely altered since Wood's day and the present BRLSI building was designed and built by John Pinch in 1830. The best known of the works of John Wood father and son are the Royal Crescent and the Circus which are reached by walking up Gay Street. The Circus was designed by the elder Wood who saw its beginning in 1754. He died that year and so it was completed by his son. The Circus is a Roman style amphitheatre with three roads leading into it. The three segments of the Circus each contain eleven houses of three storeys. Each house has a column which is divided into three sections being topped off with a Doric, Ionic and Corinthian design. There is a frieze all round the Crescents with carvings which reflect art, music, literature and science. No two carvings are the same. On the parapet around the top of the buildings are carved stone acorns, which are reminiscent of Prince Bladud mentioned at the beginning of this article. The net effect is imposing and makes the Circus one of the most visited and best loved parts of Bath. Originally the roadway was cobbled throughout but many years ago the central area was replaced by what are now very tall trees. Brock Street links the Circus to the Royal Crescent. As one walks along Brock Street one is unaware of what is awaiting. On turning a corner one is suddenly confronted with a magnificent arc of buildings having over one hundred columns. The first impression on seeing this is truly breathtaking and

warrants the description by Walter Ison, who wrote extensively about the Georgian Buildings of Bath in the late 1940s, that the Royal Crescent is “beyond question the summit of the Palladian achievement in Bath”. It was designed by John Wood the younger and was completed in 1775. Although the Royal Crescent is by far the best known and most frequently visited crescent in Bath, there are several others which are well worth seeing. These include Bloomfield, Camden, Cavendish, Lansdown, Norfolk and Widcombe. I have a particular affection for Lansdown Crescent since I have lived there for over thirty years. Set high above the city it commands outstanding views across to the Mendips in the far distance. John Betjeman has described it as follows: “Lansdown Crescent (1789-93) is not, architecturally, one of the climaxes of Bath, but is without equal as spectacular townscape. Perched perilously high up on a south facing hillside, the terraces wriggle along the contour, first convex, then concave then convex again. The roadway, fenced off from the houses by elegant urn-top railings, is built up over vaults, with a shear drop on the other side down to trees and shrubs”. It is well worth a visit.

In addition to Beau Nash and the Woods, another person who had a profound influence on Georgian Bath is Ralph Allen. He arrived in Bath from Cornwall in 1710 aged 17 years as the assistant to postmistress. With some financial backing from his father in law, General Wade, who later built many of the military roads into the Highlands of Scotland and who became MP for Bath, Allen was able to develop the chief postal routes across the country thereby making a fortune for himself. In 1724 he invested in the new Avon Navigation company which made the river navigable to Bristol and thereby providing a valuable trade route. As his wealth increased, he began to develop the stone quarries in Combe Down and devised an ingenious tramway system, involving ropes and pulleys, along present day Prior Park. This enabled him to transport the stone efficiently and relatively cheaply from Combe Down to a wharf at Widcombe alongside the River Avon. By now Ralph Allen had become seriously wealthy and the elder John Wood designed and built for him an elegant townhouse close to the Abbey, which still stands but is difficult to view since it is obscured by other buildings. He also got Wood to design and build a beautiful country house Prior Park which is widely regarded as one of the gems of the city. The building is in a superb location on Combe Down and is visible from many parts of the City. It shows off with stunning effect the beauty of the Bath stone mined from his quarry. The building stands at the top of a hill and has a beautiful landscaped garden designed in part by “Capability Brown”. The garden sweeps down from the house at Prior Park towards a series of lakes developed centuries earlier by John de Villula to provide a suitable location for his monks to fish for carp for the monastery. Allan had built a magnificent Palladian Bridge and the view of this bridge looking up the hill towards Prior Park is one of the iconic views in Bath. Allan was an astute business man but was also generous. He provided much needed funding for the Royal Mineral Water Hospital which was designed by the elder John Wood and completed in 1742. The building still exists today in Upper Borough Walls and is renowned as a centre of excellence for the cure of rheumatic diseases.

Life in Bath during the Georgian Period has been immortalised in the writings of Jane Austen and this also attracts a large number of people to visit Bath today. In fact Jane

Austin loathed many aspects of Bath society with its superficial, fawning and sycophantic atmosphere. She is largely expressing her own views in Northanger Abbey when Henry Tilney leads Catherine up to the top of Beechen Cliff to look down at the view of the city. Catherine "...voluntarily rejected the whole City of Bath as unworthy to make part of the landscape".

Fashionable taste is both capricious and ephemeral. By the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century Bath had ceased to be the great social meeting place that it was in the previous century. This was fuelled in part by the Prince Regent, later to become George IV, who preferred Brighton and bathing in the sea. Bath went into relative decline in the nineteenth century although the City expanded and developed during the reign of Queen Victoria. Some elegant villas were built mainly on the hills surrounding the City. However, there was nothing comparable to the superb Georgian Architecture and a bad slum area came into existence close to the River Avon towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Two important innovations in the first half of the nineteenth century had profound consequences for Bath. The first was the Kennet and Avon Canal, which connected the River Avon at Bath to the River Kennet at Newbury and then on to the River Thames. This effectively connected London with the ports in Bristol and was a vital conduit for the transport of freight. It was designed and built by the great civil engineer John Rennie and opened in 1810. It proved to be commercially viable until the arrival of the second innovation which was Brunel's Great Western Railway in 1840. This broad gauged railway line connected Paddington in London to Bristol and was a superb feat of engineering. The region around Bath was particularly difficult terrain requiring the construction of several tunnels and cuttings. Chief among them was Box Tunnel a few miles east of Bath. When it was built it was the longest tunnel in the world. The arrival of the railway meant that Bath had become easily accessible to the capital city. An important consequence of this was that Bath stone could be relatively quickly and cheaply transported to London and several buildings there are of Bath stone. The arrival of the railways rapidly superseded transport of freight by canal, which was always slow and expensive. The Kennet and Avon canal declined and became disused but has been gradually restored along its whole length in the last forty years and is now a delightful place to walk, to fish or for leisure travel by narrow boat. By contrast, although the railways have undergone several bleak periods, they are flourishing today and have enabled Bath to become a popular destination for day visitors.

Like many towns and cities throughout Britain, Bath expanded steadily during the second half of the nineteenth century up to the outbreak of the Second World War. However, it was devastated by the two Baedeker raids carried out by the German Luftwaffe on 25th and 26th April 1942. Over 400 people were killed and some 1900 buildings damaged or destroyed. After the War substantial rebuilding and restoration took place. The bomb damage meant that there were several open places in the centre of the City available for redevelopment. Some of the new buildings which were put up in the 1950s and 60s are nowadays regarded as eyesores by many of the Bath residents. Certainly they are badly out of keeping with the earlier Georgian and Victorian buildings. During this period

many of the older buildings were demolished as they were considered unfit to live in. This extensive demolition was halted as a result of protests from the local residents and others. Among the roads which were saved was New King Street and it was from number 19 that William Herschel discovered the planet Uranus in 1781, the first new planet to be observed since antiquity.

For the residents of Bath today, the City is a living and working environment. There is no doubt that the influx of visitors is of extreme importance for the economy of the City. However, it possesses two Universities, the City of Bath College and some excellent schools both in the private and public sectors. In addition to being an important centre for education and research, Bath plays an important role in the publishing industry and in IT. In the 19th century Stoddart and Pitt built cranes, which could be seen all around the world. The company has long since disappeared and the area where the company existed is in the process of being redeveloped. The City still has several small to medium sized engineering companies as well as the architects Buro Happold who were partially responsible for the Millennium Dome and are involved in building projects connected with the 2012 Olympic Games. Amy Williams, who was the only British athlete to obtain a Gold Medal in the 2010 Olympic Games, comes from Bath and attended the local Hayesfield School and the University of Bath. The City, like almost everywhere in the country, has a huge traffic problem which is likely to get worse. However, there must be few more pleasant places in the world to live.

Further Reading

A History of Bath: Image and Reality Graham Davis and Penny Bonsall. Carnegie Publishing Ltd 2006

Pevsner Architectural Guides: Bath Michel Forsyth with a contribution by Stephen Bird. Yale University Press