

A Visit to Bath, England

I write romantic suspense stories, and for my first novel *A Hotel in Paris*, I didn't know enough to blog or write travel articles. Having lived in Paris, I have a great affinity for the city and always will, but this is about Bath and my second book in the hotel series.

Many years ago, I was in London and took one of those day tours to Stonehenge and Bath; my first unforgettable introduction to the city. I expected to be delighted and see a few new things and I expected to learn something new-one of the many reasons I love to travel-and it was love at first sight. Yes, I do mean sight, I found Bath captivating.

On this first trip the bus rolled along the serene English countryside and the first glimpse of Stonehenge was surreal. The mesmerizing massive stones seem to beckon forward for a touch, and to wonder just exactly how they got there. An eerie sensation overcame me, and if ever I decide to write a paranormal story, I know where I'd go for my inspiration.

But I digress; we were after all on our way to Bath. We reached the ancient city and had a measly few hours in a town where the Roman Baths Museum alone would have kept me busy for many hours. I swore someday I would come back, with the realization that I was going to write book two and set it in Bath, it meant a return visit. This time for a few days, not a few hours.

The second time, instead of a bus I took the train from Paddington station in London and two delightful hours later I was in Bath, truly one of the most amazing cities. Every corner is steeped in history and beckons visitors with architectural treasures, stunning gardens and cobbled streets. A place that evokes a long ago era and transports you back in history on a joyous adventure.

There are legends that say Bath was founded by a Celtic Prince in 863 BC, he suffered from leprosy and the healing bath waters cured him.

As far as the Romans were concerned, cleanliness was next to godliness-hence the popularity of the baths. In 65 AD the invading Romans built a grand spa. Formidable Roman engineering skills allowed them to build a reservoir using lead-lined stone around the spring thus supplying water to the baths. The Sacred Spring (one of my favorite sites in the museum) has an overflow system, which even today, some 2000 years later still pumps the surplus water to the Avon River.

I spent a quite a bit of time standing in front of the Sacred Spring, the hot moist steam that covered my face was far better than any facial, and the mesmerizing falling water allowed my imagination to take root and soar.

Buried and built over for many years, the baths were discovered and excavated in 1880. The steeped-in-history museum gives the visitor a remarkable sense of times long past, through the centuries to the present.

Please do not think that I covered everything about the museum, that is by means possible in this short article. The exquisite museum has much more to offer. I just hope I whetted your appetite a tiny bit.

Right next door to the Roman Baths Museum is the Pump Room, and what a room it is. It was the center of the *ton*-the social glittery whirl of the best English society since 1706. It is for lack of a better explanation a tea room, albeit very grand, it is still a tea room and to this day the wait staff will greet you in appropriate period garb and serve you tea, scones, Bath buns and much more. The room is grand, huge and elaborate chandeliers sparkle as they hang from very high ceilings.

If that is not enough you may be entertained by the Pump Room Trio, the oldest musical ensemble in the country. The tradition of the music has continued through the ages, so while sipping your delicious tea, and munching on the scones covered with clotted cream and strawberry jam, you may feel you have traveled back in time and Jane Austen is sitting at the next table, maybe even James Boswell, or the many other great literary figures who frequented the room over the centuries.

On one side of the room stands a fountain that still to this day spouts the sulphurous water, and for a fee you can sample its unique warm taste, unique as in really *bad*. The fountain has an inscription that reads "Water is Best" and continues to be a popular spot for tourists to sample the water. The Pump Room is a stop not to be missed in a town that has been designated a World Heritage Site in 1987.

Another treasure, and there are many, is the Royal Crescent, an absolutely unique architectural gem, completed in 1774 by John Woods the Younger, it took about 7 years to complete and still it stands as a perfect semi-elliptical curve about 50 feet high and 500 feet long. It is truly a site to behold; there are 30 attached magnificent houses, among them one of the most charming, delightful hotels, aptly named the Royal Crescent Hotel. As any Jane Austen heroine would say, it is beautifully situated.

Some suites in the hotel were named after literary figures, the Sir Percy Blakeney Suite, named after the Scarlet Pimpernel, one of my favorite novels. If you haven't read it, please do. Written by Baroness Orczy, it is the ultimate, swashbuckling romantic adventure, set during the French Revolution. As the story goes, after his bold undertakings, Sir Percy Blakeney moved to Bath and settled at number 16 Royal Crescent.

The street curves along the crescent and below you can see a green carpet of lush grass separated by a ha-ha. What is a ha-ha you ask? Well, it is a cleverly designed wall invisible from the curved path and the upper part of the grassy knoll. Since the area served as a promenade to see and be seen, the ha-ha separated the *ton*-the socially elite-from mere mortals, peasants, along with sheep, cows and whatever critters lived below.

Number 1 Royal Crescent is a renowned museum that perfectly depicts the affluent Georgian lifestyle; fully restored it is owned by the Bath Preservation Trust, and is truly well worth a visit. Walking up a slight incline on Brock Street you see a breathtaking panoramic view of the Crescent.

Writing the travelogues has been difficult, because what I want to do most is hop on the plane and spend some time in Bath, instead I'll re-read the Scarlet Pimpernel, it has been a while since I've read it.

Then there is the Abbey, whose history in one way or another goes back to 676. The Abbey started out as a monastery built with used stones taken from old Roman buildings. 1090 saw a colossal Norman cathedral priory take root and over the next few centuries monastic life suffered upheavals and by 1499 destruction and ruin doomed the structure. There was a dream, Oliver King, the Bishop of Bath dreamt about angels on a ladder ascending and descending amid heaven and earth, and the rebuilding began the same year.

By 1539, history interfered with the completion, amidst battles and Henry VIII dissolution of churches, it was not until 1617 that the church and Oliver King's dream were fully realized. It is now the Church of Bath. The Bath Abbey Heritage Vaults contain among other things, Norman and Saxon stonework. The history of the Abbey is simply astounding and the structure a marvel.

The style of the architecture has been called Restrained Perpendicular-in short-a style of English Gothic architecture circa the 14th and 15th centuries. It is more flamboyant with elaborate carvings, arches, towers and fan vaulting; the ceiling has large carved vaulted fans. Looking up, the effect is simply stunning, the carved fans give an impression of massive depth. Just imagine huge fans spread and linked together.

To further define the ornate aspect of the style, the two towers at the entrance have deeply carved ladders and angels going up and down, per the dream, along with other greatly defined carvings and statues. If you're lucky enough to find yourself in Bath, take the time to really look at the entrance to the Abbey, pay attention to what is in front of you; too many treasures to list here, all magnificently carved and waiting for you to discover.

You can't go to Bath and not visit the small and intimate Jane Austen museum on Gay Street. What it lacks in artifacts, it more than makes up by the personal and interactive history of her four year stay in Bath. You can even find a portrait of Fitzwilliam Darcy that looks remarkably like Colin Firth in character. Postcards are available for sale, and of course I had to indulge and buy a few as souvenirs. I think Colin Firth was the perfect, quintessential Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Yes, there is more, much more. When I said the town is steeped in history, I was not exaggerating. Sally Lunn's house demands a visit, you might as well stop when you're hungry, Bath buns await you. The building itself is said to be medieval, excavations 'below floor level' point to Saxon and Roman remains. In 1680 Sally Lunn came to work at the bakery and brought

a recipe for buns with her. They were a hit, and to this day they serve the Sally Lunn buns-big dry buns garnished with savory or sweet fillings and tea or coffee, your preference. Walking in to the ancient building, going down the narrow uneven stairs and being greeted by the wait staff wearing period uniforms is worth the visit. However sitting down in old dilapidated chairs, facing old crooked tables that wiggle gives you the feeling that you've yet again become aligned in old, living history. Looking at walls the thought occurred to me that the only thing that is holding up the plaster walls are the many coats of paint.

Pulteney Bridge deserves a mention, a stunning covered bridge completed in 1774 was built with stores in mind, while you crossed the bridge you could shop. The bridge is named after William Pulteney, landowner and developer extraordinaire who wanted to develop the grazing land in Bathwick. He commissioned Robert Adams to build the bridge, and to this day you can stroll and shop. From the bridge you can see the Pulteney Weir, (and before you ask-a weir is a dam placed across a river or waterway to divert water flow and prevent flooding) built to stave off the flooding which occurred frequently in the lower part of the city.

Bath has so much to offer, I just went over some of the major attractions, but any street, any garden will take you on an unforgettable adventure, all you need is a comfortable pair of shoes and plenty of time.

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