

POSTCARDS

THE PUMP ROOM

Refined but supremely welcoming; genteel but with a subtle, polished background buzz of conviviality – no visit to Bath would be complete without taking refreshment in the Pump Room.
Melissa Blease explores this most-exclusive comfort stop and raises a pinky to take afternoon tea

If a tour of the Roman Baths complex is an integral cog in the wheel of the 'Total Bath' connection, a refreshment break at the Pump Room (under the same roof) is an equally unforgettably delightful experience. It's possible, however, to indulge your senses in this gloriously elegant, neo-classical salon as a stand-alone, thoroughly relaxing refuelling zone – as indeed, many Bath locals do on a regular basis, maintaining a Heritage City tradition that began more than two centuries ago.

ABOUT

This bastion of good taste has offered a supremely civilised backdrop to all manner of social intercourse-related events since 1799. Opening early for breakfast and morning coffee before seamlessly moving on through lunch and tea (and dinner, during July and August), the overall atmosphere is defined by the exquisitely dignified surroundings: the sparkling chandeliers, Corinthian columns and tables adorned with crisp linen and gleaming tableware induce 'wow!' factor responses from all who step through the doors. Once at your table, impeccably polite, efficient staff cater to your every whim at every turn, while the Pump Room trio or a pianist provide elegant musical accompaniment to your prandial treats-of-choice. It's a room with a view, too – either across the Roman Baths from the windows towards the rear of the salon, or over Abbey Square from tables towards the front of the building.

HISTORY

The thirst for 'partaking of' the thermal waters of Bath – once believed to offer healing properties for all manner of ailments – became so popular during the late 17th century that it became necessary to install a pump to allow public access water sourced directly from the spring. In the early 18th century, British physician and philanthropist William Oliver persuaded the Bath Corporation to erect buildings where the drinkers could be sheltered – a popular initiative that included the main Pump Room and the Hetling Pump room, named after the building's then-owner Ernst von Hetling, today the location of the Thermae Bath Spa Visitor Shop.

As the popularity of Bath as a spa destination grew, the Pump Room could no longer accommodate the scores of people keen to drink the water, so multiple extensions and improvements were made to the building.

Along with the Lower Assembly Rooms and Sydney Gardens and hotel, The Pump Room eventually completed the triangle of locations in which Georgian 'high society' liked to see and be seen. The original Pump Room building was designed by John Harvey to specifications requested by Bath's Master of Ceremonies Beau Nash in 1706, before the discovery of the Roman remains. The foundations of the Roman temple precinct were discovered during preparatory excavations for designs by Thomas Baldwin who took the project over from John Harvey, but whose designs were also never completed. When Baldwin was declared bankrupt in 1793, his long-time rival (and official city architect of the day) John Palmer continued the scheme to his own plans. The Pump Room as a work-in-progress was opened to the public by the Duchess of York in 1795 and finished completely in 1799.

Live music has been performed in the Pump Room since the opening of the original building in 1706, a tradition upheld by the highly acclaimed Pump Room Trio (the longest established resident ensemble in Europe) today, while the original Pump Room Orchestra is believed to be the first resident band in the country to play in an assembly room. When Baroque composer Handel visited Bath in 1749, he collaborated with Bath-born composer and organist Thomas Chilcot in support of the Pump Room band, English tenor and musician Thomas Linley and astrologer/composer William Herschel both played in the band during the 1760s, and Gustav Holst – best known for his orchestral suite *The Planets* – was a guest conductor during the early 20th century.

The Pump Room became a restaurant during the Second World War, and fortunately escaped destruction during the Baedeker Air Raids on Bath in 1942.

Historical figures who have visited the Pump Room to take the waters include personalities as diverse as Jane Austen (who used the backdrop as a setting for key scenes in both *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*), Charles Dickens (whose iconic character Mr Pickwick in his first novel *The Pickwick Papers*, published in 1836, was urged to take the waters by his faithful servant Sam Weller), American showman Buffalo Bill and the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, who spent his exile in Bath between 1936–41.

The Pump Room has been used as a location in both ITV and BBC productions remakes of *Persuasion*, the BBC's *Northanger Abbey*, Ken Russell's 1971 film *The Music Lovers* and 2008 BBC drama *Bonekickers*.

Afternoon tea is served

A summer's evening event

The Pump Room fountain