

Bath Spa - A Den of Inequality?

The first day of an RFS 'West Country Weekend', superbly organised by Polly Legg, focused on Bath with the morning consisting of a visit to the Building of Bath Museum followed in the afternoon by a visit to No. 1 Royal Crescent. The contrast between the two sites and their respective methods of contextual historical interpretation was an enlightening aside to their actual content, providing an interesting perspective on the dilemma of education versus tourism.

Our excellent guide for the day was Curatorial Assistant of the 'Building of Bath Museum' Lisa White. A walking encyclopaedia on Bath, Lisa played an integral role in determining the overall layout and content of the museum which is situated in the Countess of Huntingdon's Chapel located in The Paragon. Built in 1765, a Gothic buoy in a sea of classicism, the Chapel was purchased by the Bath Preservation Trust and opened as a museum in 1991. In 1993 the Sainsbury study gallery was added providing an architectural archive containing 18th century reprints of architectural works and access to a useful and ever increasing source of historical Bath-related research material.

The museum is divided into two parts with the overall emphasis on the 18th century boom in Bath's fortunes. The lower section concentrates on the development of the city, its growth in the Georgian period and focuses on the major players of the period, Wood, Allen, Gay & Jones, the architecture, the classical sources of inspiration and methods of construction. The upper section looks at the interiors of Bath's houses, the colours and styles of interior decoration and, of particular interest, the varied craftsmen and entrepreneurs, including upholsterers and cabinetmakers, who supplied the settings for Bath's 18th century elite. The skills of this army of tradespeople provided up-to-the-minute fashions and to their immense pride could, in some cases, create a complete interior in a twenty-four hour turnaround! The layout is clear and easy to follow and the use of 'touchy feely' exhibits not only caters for the younger generation but provides useful information on construction and materials (fig. 2).

After lunch the RFS entourage re-grouped outside No 1 The Crescent in the manner of countless previous school parties and coach trips from the world over. The intention of the Bath Preservation Trust is that visitors step back in time into an 18th century Bath town house. To the majority of its visitors No 1 The Crescent probably encapsulates the perfect tourist experience; very little to read and, providing you do not get waylaid by a friendly guide, you could be out (via the obligatory shop) and on the way to the Roman Baths within ten minutes. Believe me, I witnessed it! To anyone with a genuine interest for historical integrity,



Fig. 2 Lisa White explaining the 11 stages in the production of a Chippendale style mirror; recently made by Charles Oldham, a local craftsman

the house is perhaps a disappointment with scant information regarding the exhibits, none of which incidentally are original to the house. According to our guide Lisa, the furnishings bear little resemblance to the actual intended use of the property. The present 'Country House' furnishing obscures the original purpose of the property as high-society, fashion-conscious lodgings taken originally for Bath's celebrated and notorious winter season and as such misses the essence of Bath's development, success and role as a mid 18th century city.

If you have the opportunity to spend a day in Bath I would strongly recommend a visit to the Building of Bath Museum before you do anything else. On leaving the museum you ought to have gained a good impression of 18th century Bath, in particular the reasons for its growth as a city. The only possible downside, if you find the exhibits to be half as interesting as I did, is that on leaving the museum it will probably be time to catch the train home!

Toby Pinn