

Lecture, held at the European Spa Kick-off meeting at Harrogate (UK), June 17, 2019; by Astrid Köhler.¹

Not just an English Spa: Harrogate's European Identity

“No one can deny, who is acquainted with the social and medical history of this country, that mineral waters have for the last thirty years been growing out of fashion”, writes Augustus Granville in 1841 in his seminal book on the *Spas of England*.² Even the old and famous ones, he continues, like Bath and Tunbridge Wells, “have become nearly forgotten”. And places like Cheltenham and Leamington might have had a recent “elevation”, but that would have been temporary and due to courses outside the realm of medicine.³

In contrast to that, he says, look at Carlsbad or Aix la Chapelle: “Are they not now what they always have been – most valuable [...], and therefore most frequented?”⁴

Why then this turn of events in England, “What has been the cause of such disaster?”⁵, he asks. Granville's answers include medical, social, cultural and economic reasons, criticize the behavior of spa doctors as much as that of the local authorities and private landlords, and touch upon points like the selling of bottled waters, the “unnatural growth” of some spas into largish towns, the strong social etiquette prevailing there, or the “exorbitance of the charges”. I quote:

“I have alluded, in treating of Harrogate, to the weekly expense of a gentleman and his lady, with three daughters, and two men and a woman servant, who, while living at one of the principal hotels at that Spa, and

¹ „The European Spa as a Transnational Public Space and Social Metaphor“. Funded by Humanities in the European Research Area HERA Call „Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe“ (2019-2022), <http://heranet.info/projects/public-spaces-culture-and-integration-in-europe/the-european-spa-as-a-transnational-public-space-and-social-metaphor/>

² A.B. Granville: *Spas of England And Principal Bathing Places*. Vol.1: The North. New edition with an introduction by Geoffrey Martin, Bath: Adams & Dart 1971, p. xxxv.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Granville, p. xxxvi.

⁵ Granville, p. xxxvii.

using the public rooms, was disbursing seldom less than twenty guineas a week; and had he desired a private sitting room, the charge would have been three guineas more.

Now mark the difference in this respect at the Spas in Germany. The same number of persons would have been magnificently lodged, and sumptuously fed in the new hotel at Wildbad, called the BELLEVUE [...] for 189 florins a week, including every possible expense for master and servant, instead of 281, which are the representatives of twenty-three guineas.”⁶

Elsewhere, he stresses that the costs of living in Harrogate are hardly lower than in London, or, in his words: one “must not expect to live at *Harrogate* for much less than at *Highgate*.”⁷ The author is convinced, however, that all of this can be mended, and that the advice given in his book will – if taken on – have a “resuscitating effect”⁸ on the likes of Bath, Cheltenham and Harrogate, and offer equally useful lessons to “the newly discovered spas now forming”⁹.

Despite this book’s age, we can take a number of cues from it for our own, contemporary investigations. As reiterated by David Blackbourn some 160 years after Granville, “spas are places where several lines of historical enquiry intersect”. It’s their complex character as spaces

- of illness and health
- of rest and activity
- of withdrawal from, and heightened experience of, social life
- of mainstream developments and deviation from them
- of traditionalism and social experiment – to name but a few – that makes them such a fascinating object of enquiry. Their infrastructure, too, reveals a distinct mix between rural and urban elements, and between provinciality and cosmopolitanism. To quote Blackbourn again: “The spa reproduced an urban way of life in a rural setting: theatre, reading room, luxury shops, coffee house. [...] it offered the satisfactions of urbanity to a growing public that wanted to consume

⁶ Granville, p. xli.

⁷ Granville, p. 71.

⁸ Granville, p. xl.

⁹ Granville, p. xl.

and converse as well as take the cure.”¹⁰ Accordingly, he calls them “service towns per excellence”¹¹ and Alexa Geisthövel coined the term “hydropolis”¹² for them.

By studying their history, we engage with a whole complex of *histories* such as the history of medicine and science, the changing relationship between the social classes, patterns of urbanization, the history of travel, the advance of the nation state, the history of Jews in Europe (for whom some spas were places of inclusion, others of exclusion), the history of gender relations and the emergence of women’s rights, the origins of the welfare state, the history of attitudes towards nature, the history of consumption and the emergence of the service industries etc. etc. It is our conviction that spa towns played a much larger part in these processes than previously acknowledged; and one of our project’s aims is to redress this imbalance.

As you well know, our approach to the topic is a pan-European one, conceptualising European spas as hubs of transnational interaction and hence as nodes in a network spanning the entire continent (to which this island geographically belongs). By doing this, we are by no means trying to ignore, let alone level out national differences. We assume no single or unified European concept of spa life. Rather, we focus on the interdependency between the regional, the national and the European dimension of the spas. There is no doubt that their positions and cultural, political, and social functions did not only change dramatically over the period of our enquiry, but that they differed considerably in their respective national and regional contexts.

Let’s return for a moment to our spa doctor Augustus Granville and the comparison he drew between English and German speaking spas in his time. His *Spas of England* from which I quoted were preceded by *The Spas of Germany*, published in 1837,

¹⁰ David Blackbourn: ‘Taking the Waters’: Meeting Places of the Fashionable World. In: Martin Geyer / Johannes Paulmann (Hg): *The Mechanics of Internationalism. Culture, Society and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War*. OUP 2001, S. 435-457, hier: 441.

¹¹ Blackbourn, p. 446.

¹² Alexa Geisthövel, „Promenadenmischungen. Raum und Kommunikation in Hydropolen 1830-1880“ in: *Ortsgespräche. Raum und Kommunikation im 19. Und 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Alexander Geppert / Ulla Jensen / Jörn Weichold (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005), 203-229, here: 203.

which, according to Geoffrey Martin, caused much admiration, but also calls for giving the same thorough overview over the English spa landscape. It is no surprise then that comparison is the basic mode underlying his observations about the English spas. And he was not the only one:

Among his many contemporaries writing on the same subject, Granville picked out as worthy of reading James Johnson's *Pilgrimage to the Spas of central Europe* (covering mainly Habsburg and the German lands), which was to appear in 1841 and – says Granville – written by someone with an equally serious engagement in the subject (who happened to also be an old friend and erstwhile “brother officer in the naval service”¹³).

Johnson toured the German spas at about the same time as Granville did the English ones, and his book, too, is shaped by comparison. What struck him about the likes of Carlsbad, Kissingen or Wildbad were less the waters' healing powers (he could almost always name a comparable well in England), but what we call spa culture and the composition of the spa societies over there. I quote:

“Individuals of all ranks, gathering there from neighbouring parts and the most distant countries, united there within narrow confines, mostly for one and the same purpose [...] This variety [...] enhances the charms of indiscriminate social intercourse, and adds an additional value even to the patient's solitary hours. [...] A common purpose, the same society, the participation of the same amusements and pleasures, facilitate the formation of many interesting connexions. The [...] social meetings are not hampered by the trammels of ceremony, and we readily acknowledge and enjoy mental and social talents wherever we meet with them.”¹⁴

Under the heading “Society and Manners” he observes that spas over there were micro-versions of the whole society, places where “all ranks and classes, from the prince to the peasant, are jumbled together, without ever jostling each other. They drink together, bathe together, walk together, talk together, smoke together, joke together, dine together, muse together, sup together and, then go

¹³ Granville, p. xxii.

¹⁴ James Johnson: *Pilgrimages to the Spas*. In *Pursuit of Health and Recreation*. London 1841, p.59.

to bed, all with the greatest decorum, quietude, civility and I may add, ceremony.”¹⁵

The reason for Johnson’s astonishment was that he found his native spas to be rather different (and we had this reference to etiquette in Granville’s book as well). “It must be candidly confessed”, Johnson wrote, “that this scene, which is every where the same, exhibits a striking contrast to spa-society in England, where each class forms a clique that repels its neighbour, as one electrified ball repels another.”¹⁶ Spas as spaces of social compromise then, versus spas as spaces of social segregation. This was accompanied by remarks such as this about Neuwied, where “the Jew and the Gentile, the Protestant and the Catholic, the Quaker and the Sceptic, all live upon equal terms, and with equal rights, unmolested in the free enjoyment of their various beliefs or disbeliefs”¹⁷ – which again displays a form of compromise not known to Johnson from his native spas.

Such observations tie in with my allusion earlier to the different cultural, political, and social functions spas took in their regional and national settings. In the Anglo-German context, it would be apt to consider them in direct relation to the state of the nations and their capital cities, as they seem to have taken on complementary functions vis à vis them:

Up until 1871 Germany did not exist as a nation state, and hence had no centralised capital. Indeed the largest German cities such as Hamburg, Frankfurt, Munich or Berlin, could not begin to compete with London as metropolitan centres. There was no such thing as a Berlin or Munich season, and when people from far apart places wanted to meet, they met in the spas. Likewise did the foreigners. The long history of Russians coming to German speaking spas is just one example of this. Baden-Baden was called the summer capital of Europe, and the smaller German spas, too, had guests from abroad; some from further away, but most from other European countries – including England. For the tiny Black Forest resort of Wildbad for instance, Dr Johnson reports alone 10

¹⁵ Johnson, p. 86.

¹⁶ Johnson, p.87.

¹⁷ Johnson, p.30.

English visitors for 1837, 130 for 1838 and “[i]n 1839, about the middle of August, when I was there, the number had still increased.”¹⁸

For three months a year then, places like Baden-Baden, or Pyrmont, or even Wildbad for that matter, offered a whiff of the big wide world and something like a metropolitan atmosphere. As places of a heterogeneous composition, heightened communication, freedom from stifling hierarchies and of social and cultural experiment, they were what we normally see in the big cities: catalysts of modernity (or modernisation). (As said before, this is different in different national contexts, and if we were to draw in the Habsburg spas here, we’d have to differentiate further – maybe in the discussion.)

The British Isles, however, had London as the metropolis per se, and **it** certainly did not need any backup from some pretty backwaters. Examining the spa societies in Bath, Cheltenham and elsewhere, we see much more of the opposite reaction to the potentially unstable configuration of temporary societies, that is, special efforts at social distinction. Looking at descriptions of Bath from the early 19th century, we learn that although the social exclusiveness of the resort had started to crumble, the prestige of the upper classes – and I quote Peter Borsay – remained “protected by the creation of a series of select clubs and social gatherings that were in effect status-safe zones”.¹⁹ These zones were defined not only socially, but spatially. Keiko Parker describes a “special topographic feature” of the expanding town: “that as one goes north one goes upward, [and] that ‘upward’ is not just physical, but social”.²⁰ She then identifies the different locations of the various characters of Jane Austen’s novel *Persuasion* (1817) in Bath and concludes that its topography is “closely integrated with the characters’ rank and situation in life. [...] The entire city becomes a metaphor for the society she portrays.”²¹

So, in this country, the likes of Bath functioned as a kind of refuge from the most dynamic, international and socially diverse city in Europe. They offered to the

¹⁸ Johnson, *Pilgrimages to the Spas*, 105.

¹⁹ Borsay, *Georgian Bath*, 10-11.

²⁰ Keiko Parker: “‘What part of Bath do you think they will settle in?’ Jane Austen’s use of Bath in *Persuasion*.” in *Persuasions* 32 (2001), 166-176, here: 168.

²¹ Parker, “Jane Austen’s use of Bath”, 169.

upper classes social and cultural stability and a return to stratified social forms. Rather than as catalysts of modernization, they acted as shock absorbers for its forces which were in full swing in the capital.

This ties in with another observation Johnson and his compatriots made when comparing the spas across the channel. The international character of the visitors did not – or rarely – apply to the English spas. Bath was deemed a “truly national attraction”²² and filled with mainly English, Scottish, and some Irish upper class visitors. Cheltenham prided itself on hosting some “foreign noblesse”²³, namely representatives of the French Royal family who had managed to escape the *terreur* of the French Revolution and emigrate. But the fact that this is worthy of note marks it out as the exception. Indeed, Cheltenham even lost some of its native regulars to continental spas once the Napoleonic Wars were over and the Continental Blockade lifted.

As mentioned before, Granville’s grand survey appeared in 1841, at a time when he saw a general decline of spas in this country. However, Geoffrey Martin points out, that Granville experienced them “still in their prime, but on the eve of a slow [...] but unmistakable decline.”²⁴ There were greater challenges to come, as it was in fact “the sea-side resorts that prospered and multiplied during the rest of the century”²⁵, and – aided by the developing railway network – managed to attract a potential mass audience: that is, the growing middle classes. Or in Martin’s words: “The tradition of the spas, for all their popularity, was aristocratic; the tradition of the sea-side, for all the distinction of its early patrons, was to be popular.”²⁶

This narrative of late 19th century decline does not, however, apply to Harrogate. Already master Granville had claimed that “Harrogate has the elements within itself of becoming a Spa of the first magnitude, **even to the extent of attracting foreign travellers**”. This was not so because he thought it was

²² Jon Stobart, “In Search of a Leisure Hierarchy: English Spa Towns and their Place in the 18th Century Urban System” in *New Directions in Urban History. Aspects in European Art, Health, Tourism and Leisure since the Enlightenment*, eds. Peter Borsay / Gunther Hirschfelder / Ruth E. Mohrmann (Münster: Waxmann, 2000) 19-40, here: 20.

²³ Quoted in Humphris and Willoughby, *Georgian Cheltenham*, 135.

²⁴ Martin, introduction to Granville, p. vi.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Martin, introduction to Granville, p. xx.

well-developed, in fact he found it “quite primitive” – but he saw a huge natural potential that just needed unfolding in the right directions.²⁷ Not only did it have a high number of wells of different character, that is sulphur, saline and iron containing waters, but it also offered a “picturesque arrangement of nature and art”²⁸ – that is the beginnings of an efficient spa infrastructure without excessive urban growth.²⁹ It had “the very air of a watering place”,³⁰ Granville says, and “[a] spirited capitalist would find an unexplored mine of wealth in Harrogate”.³¹

Now we know that 1841, the year when his book came out, was the very year when the Harrogate Improvement Act was passed, which, to quote Malcolm Neesam, “enabled Harrogate to develop beyond the self-interest of the inn-keepers and doctors, as it provided a comprehensive piece of legislation which would benefit the entire community.”³² And indeed, the Royal Pump Room Building was finished in 1842, succeeded by the New Victoria Baths in 1871 and the Royal Bath in 1897. 1846 saw the formation of a water company, the town obtained gaslight in 1847, and – quite importantly – was linked to the railway network in 1848. (Before that, it was horse coach from Manchester or Leeds.) Another decision taken with the Harrogate Improvement Act was not to exclude the poor from the healing benefits of its sulphur waters. Whilst drinking the water in the Pump Room accrued charges for the guests, a tap was installed on the outside of the building for everyone to use for free.

This, and other measures taken, point towards Harrogate’s alignment with a spa culture from beyond this island. In fact it looked to continental Europe in several respects: To start with, many of its new developments followed European examples. In the planning period for the Royal Bath for instance, a surveyor was sent to the major European spas to ascertain the newest developments there. This was followed by an international design competition to make sure the new structures would even exceed the best examples from the continent. Another case in point is the *Kursaal* later called the Royal Hall, which was opened in 1903.

²⁷ Granville, p. 83.

²⁸ Granville, p.66.

²⁹ Granville, p.67: “Neither Leamington nor Cheltenham can boast of such a rural promenade in the immediate vicinity of their springs.”

³⁰ Granville, p. 36.

³¹ Granville, p.84.

³² Malcolm Neesam: Harrogate Great Chronicle, 1332-1841. Lancaster 2005.

The publishers of a book devoted to its history point out that it is an “example of a building type which, although of fairly frequent occurrence elsewhere in Europe, never completely established itself in Britain.”³³ It is a grand structure that incorporates several different functions such as dining hall, assembly hall, music hall, theatre, casino, and even hotel. This combination was unusual in England, as was the extravagant style of the building, which, and I quote again, “broke with the established British spa tradition, moving quite deliberately toward the continental manner.”³⁴ Moreover, the building became the centre of a whole complex of public spaces – gardens, walkways, bandstands, tennis courts – designed for mingling, exercise and relaxation.

[[Also think of Kissingen Spring and Harrogate District Montpellier]]

Concerning the medical side, too, Harrogate looked to the continent. The variety of its wells allowed it to diversify the treatments on offer by taking on some new developments – this time mainly from France and Sweden. The British Medical Journal of July 1919 reports that:

“In order to make the best use of these mineral waters the Harrogate Corporation [...] has spent nearly a quarter of a million pounds on the provision of modern bathing establishments. Besides the local sulphur water baths, apparatus for almost every approved balneological and electrical treatment has been set up [...]. At the Royal Baths more than seventy different baths, packs, douches, massage-douches, electrical treatments, and accessory treatments are given by trained attendants.”³⁵

And in order to spread the word about this among the “members of the medical profession”, discounts were offered and information materials printed.

But whilst copying the continental spas, Harrogate also started to compete with them for a more international clientele. If the „continental watering places“ had previously „taken the cream of the patients and reaped a golden harvest“, the British Medical Journal was happy to note, Harrogate had, by the early 1900s, made good progress in reversing this trend and could now „claim to rival the best

³³ Kursaal. A History of Harrogate’s Royal Hall. Harrogate International Centre 2008, p. 6.

³⁴ Kursaal, p. 8.

³⁵ British Medical Journal, July 1919 (online resource).

of the Continental spas“.³⁶ Perhaps one of the most illustrious, though by no means the only foreign guest was Princess Alix of Hesse, later Tsarina Alexandra of Russia, who visited Harrogate in 1894 and is said to have become the godmother of her English landlady’s twins (whilst all other godchildren she had were of proper blue blood).³⁷

This little episode is remarkable in that it points towards „the informal and relaxed atmosphere” of Harrogate, which was rather different from the formality of Bath and Cheltenham, and, as Malcom Neesam asserts, „atypical of British spas“.³⁸ Whilst Harrogate might not have had “prince and peasant” at the same dining table (as Johnson once saw on his travels), it nevertheless had a social regime more akin to, say, Wildbad than to Bath. In Hargrove’s Guidebook to Harrogate we read that “at table each person takes their seat in the same order they arrived at the place, and ascend gradually as the others leave it...”. This bespeaks a particular order, of course; but crucially, it is not based on social class.

Harrogate’s relaxed atmosphere and mixed clientele were also the reason for its ability to survive and even thrive at a time when other English spas were said to be sliding into decline. The success of this spa against the overall trend does of course show best in its visitor numbers: from just under 4000 (3778) in 1842 to just over 11 and a half thousand (11626) in 1867; and in the years around 1900 the Pump Room alone had about 15000 annual visitors.³⁹

In a publication dated 1914, R. Murray Gilchrist describes Harrogate’s atmosphere as „extraordinarily invigorating“ and concludes that „In the season it is as gaily-colored as any watering-place in Europe“. And in line with many such European spas, this was to change only in the inter-war-period, but addressing this, would far exceed the remits of my paper.

I hope to have been able though – through the prism of Harrogate – to give a glimpse of the interrelatedness of the European spas well into the 20th century,

³⁶ British Medical Journal, July 1919 (online resource).

³⁷ See: <http://royalcentral.co.uk/blogs/gifts-from-an-imperial-godmother-the-allen-twins-of-harrogate-123685>.

³⁸ Neesam, p. 175.

³⁹ Wikipedia, quoting Yorkshire County Council Archive publications.

and to show that spas functioned both as exceptions to, and as concentrated microcosms of, the social structures surrounding them.