



BATH AND THE PICTURESQUE

Andrew Swift

Today, picturesque is often a somewhat vague term, indicating that a particular place or a particular view is quaint or attractive. Back in the eighteenth century, when the term was first coined, however, it not only meant something very specific, but came with a whole raft of highfalutin aesthetic theorising.

This was largely due to William Gilpin, who promulgated the idea of the picturesque in a book with the catchy title of *Observations on the River Wye and Several Parts of South Wales, &c, Relative to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Summer of the Year 1770*. This is what Gilpin had to say about Bath:

“At Bath, the buildings are strikingly splendid: but the picturesque eye finds little amusement among such objects ... As objects of curiosity, the parades, the baths, the rooms, and the abbey, are all worth seeing. The rising grounds about Bath, as they appear from the town, are a great ornament to it: tho’ they have nothing pleasing in themselves: no breaks: no masses of woody scenery.”


Other writers followed Gilpin’s lead, producing guidebooks which encouraged tourists ‘to examine the face of a country by the rules of picturesque beauty’. One of the most popular was *A Picturesque Guide to Bath, Bristol, Hotwells, &c &c* by Messrs Ibbetson, Laporte & J Hassell, published in 1793. They viewed Bath a good deal more favourably than Gilpin:

“In beauty and elegance it far exceeds any view of London. The river Avon glides along its fertile vale till it reaches the city, where the buildings obscure it from the sight ... Viewed under the influence of a meridian sun, and through the medium of an unclouded atmosphere, Bath presents to the sight, and the imagination, everything that is united with the idea of perfect beauty ...”





The View from Beechen Cliff
(Andrew Swift)



“The general aspect of Bath depends more for its characteristics on the hour of the day, and the state of the atmosphere, than almost any other city. In a clear morning, half an hour after sunrise, and when the smoke of the town, which is always the greatest at the time of lighting fires, is dispelled, the eastern part of the town appears to great advantage, particularly Camden-place, and Beacon-hill: the light partially connects itself with the lower town, till it reaches the cathedral; it is there intercepted by Claverton-downs; and the remaining part of Bath, towards Widcombe, is enveloped in shade. When the sun has risen above the summit of the opposite down, the effect of the light then becomes general, and disperses without forming any composition for a picture.

An evening scene is productive of much more brilliant effect: the Crescents are then seen to the utmost advantage; their situation, their concave form, which catches a variety of light, and their tone of colour, are then peculiarly adapted to the pencil. In the month of January, when the air is frosty, and the sun is dropping from the horizon, there is an effect of light and shadow on these buildings, and on the Circus, that is not to be described with the pen.

It will perhaps be objected, that the whiteness of Bath is highly unfriendly to it, considered as a picturesque object. Were it not for the variety of form in its buildings, and the various elevations on which they stand, this circumstance would certainly detract much from its beauty, at least in the artist’s estimation; but there is a grey hue which objects in shadow assume, into which the white softens, and with which it harmonizes with peculiar effect at Bath.


When viewed from a small distance, the city has an appearance equally singular and beautiful:


streets intersect streets – crescents rise above crescents, with plots of grass and small plantations intervening between them – the venerable majesty of the cathedral contrasts admirably with the newer buildings; and the repose the eye finds when it wanders from the shewy grandeur of the stately edifices to the simplicity of the surrounding country, is equally friendly to our forming a correct judgement of the pretensions of both.”

To say that people took this sort of thing seriously is an understatement, and, while there was much good sense and fine judgement in guides such as these, the cult of the picturesque spawned much that was risible, especially from those unfamiliar with the aesthetic theories which informed it, who simply applied rigid formulae to whatever view they happened to stumble upon.

It became, in short, a subject ripe for satire, and, as so often, it was Jane Austen who was more than happy to oblige. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland joins Henry and Eleanor Tilney for a walk ‘round Beech Cliff, that noble hill whose beautiful verdure and hanging coppice render it so striking an object from almost every opening in Bath’. After discussing Gothic novels and history, the conversation turns to another subject on which Catherine ‘had nothing to say’:

“They were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste. Here Catherine was quite lost. She knew nothing of drawing – nothing of taste: and she listened to them with an attention which brought her little profit, for they talked in phrases which conveyed scarcely any idea to her.”





“The little which she could understand, however, appeared to contradict the very few notions she had entertained on the matter before. It seemed as if a good view were no longer to be taken from the top of a high hill, and that a clear blue sky was no longer a proof of a fine day. She was heartily ashamed of her ignorance ... confessed and lamented her want of knowledge, declared that she would give anything in the world to be able to draw; and a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in everything admired by him, and her attention was so earnest that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. He talked of foregrounds, distances, and second distances – side-screens and perspectives – lights and shades; and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath as unworthy to make part of a landscape.”

Catherine Morland’s walk to Beechen Cliff is recreated as the final walk in Andrew Swift’s *On Foot in Bath: Fifteen Walks around a World Heritage City*, a new edition of which was published in 2020.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Swift is the author and co-author of several books on Bath, including *On Foot in Bath* and *Country Walks from Bath*, and has contributed walk features to *The Bath Magazine*, *The Bristol Magazine*, the *Western Daily Press* and other publications. He has also devised and led guided walks for groups and organisations including the *Bathscape Walking Festival*, the *Bath Literature Festival* and the *Bath International Music Festival*.

