



Bath in Literature

Sabine Purshouse


The city of Bath has provided inspiration for poets, playwrights and novelists over several centuries.

Perhaps the earliest story featuring Bath was by Geoffrey of Monmouth, a Welsh nobleman, who attempted to write a *History of the Kings of Britain* in 1136. As reliable sources for historians were hard to come by he may have used his imagination to fill in the gaps in knowledge. He gave us the story of Bladud, the 9th King of the Britons and legendary founder of Bath in prehistoric times. The story was retold many times and reappears in the elder John Wood's *Essay Towards a Description of Bath* in 1749. In the most popular version Bladud contracted leprosy, became a social outcast and had to roam the land with a herd of pigs until the warm mineral waters in the Bath area cured him. In the Parade Gardens Bladud is shown with a pig, and a statue of undetermined date in the Roman Baths commemorates Bladud as a king.

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, published in the 14th century, place Bath on the medieval map of England with *The Wife of Bath's Tale* although the story is not even set in Bath. It does show the wife of Bath to be a smart woman who teaches a young knight a tough lesson on "the thing that women most desire".

From the middle of the 18th century a large number of writers took an interest in Bath, when it rose to fame as England's premier resort with its grand new Square, Circus and Crescent, and its splendid buildings like the Assembly Rooms and the Pump Room. As Bath turned into a playground where heirs to land and title socialised with people of wealth acquired through commerce and the aspiring professional classes, it provided rich material for writers. Plays, poems and, above all, novels, then a new form of literature, leave us with a wealth of mostly satirical cameos of Bath between the 1760s and the 1830s. They were hugely popular at a time when increasing literacy levels and leisure time created a demand for books, widely available in circulating libraries, still visible in Bath.

One of the first to popularise the new trend to laugh at the expense of spa visitors was Christopher Anstey. *The New Bath Guide* of 1766 describes a holiday of the Blunderhead family, fresh from the country, in letters in comic verse. They expose the elegance on show as merely a façade, behind which naïve young ladies fall prey to men posing as aristocrats, rich men are exploited by greedy medics, and the water in the King's Bath is served as a medicinal drink in the Pump Room. It is all still highly amusing to read today.




*“Of all the gay places the world can afford,
By gentle and simple for pastime ador’d,
Fine balls, and fine concerts, fine buildings and springs,
Fine walks, and fine views, and a thousand fine things,
Nor to mention the sweet situation and air,
What place, my dear mother, with Bath can compare?”*


Watching a play at a theatre was a well-established leisure activity in 18th century England. *The Rivals*, a comedy set in Bath by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, was first performed in London in 1775 and has remained a firm favourite on stage, with its plot focused on Bath as a marriage market. It features the wonderful Mrs Malaprop, who entertains us with her “malapropisms”, and Lydia Languish, who enjoys Bath for its circulating libraries, where novels disappear from shelves so fast that her maid can’t get hold of them. Bath, of course, witnesses a happy ending for Lydia and even for Mrs Malaprop, who marries Sir Lucius O’Trigger.

One of the novels borrowed from the library in *The Rivals* is *Humphrey Clinker* by Tobias Smollett, published in 1771. Here Bath is a stop on a journey through Britain, and we get different perspectives of the city in letters from a grumpy old country squire and his entourage. He is not impressed with the city’s new lay-out. “The Square, though irregular, is, on the whole, pretty well laid out,” he concedes. “The Circus is a pretty bauble,” but “it is inconvenient from its situation, at so great a distance from all the markets, baths, and places of public entertainment.” His niece Lydia, by contrast, thinks Bath “is an earthly paradise: The Square, the Circus and the Parades put you in mind of the sumptuous palaces.”

Bath was also the destination for a day-trip from other spas, such as Clifton and Hotwells in Bristol. In Fanny Burney’s novel *Evelina*, published in 1778, the heroine visits Bath in the company of her future husband, Lord Orville, and friends. Her comments are much more favourable than Mr Bramble’s: “The Crescent, the prospect from it, and the elegant symmetry of the circus delighted me,” she writes in a letter. Yet at the Pump Room Evelina is doubtful about “the public exhibition of the ladies in the bath”, which she feels is “indelicate.” Lord Orville disapproves of Bath’s “amusements” because they encourage gambling!

Two novels by Jane Austen, both published in 1817, are set in the city. *Northanger Abbey*, its first draft written in the 1790s, captures Bath in its heyday. For the young Catherine Morland, daughter of a country clergyman, the holiday in the city brings adventures that are quite different from those she has read about in novels like *Evelina*. In the Pump Room she makes new friends, who turn out to be false friends, but at the Assembly Rooms she is properly introduced by the Master of Ceremonies to the young man who eventually becomes her husband - after a few dramatic twists and turns. *Persuasion* shows us Bath in decline in the early 1800s, where the spendthrift Sir Walter Elliot of Kellynch Hall has to rent out his ancestral home to an admiral and take a house in Bath, because “he might there be important at comparatively little expense.” Ironically his new address is at Camden Place, now called Camden Crescent, on a steep hill far above the city’s amenities. Bath still fulfils the expectation of a happy end between his daughter Anne and Captain Wentworth; she accepts his proposal on the Gravel Walk, up to the Royal Crescent.






Charles Dickens describes the Bath holiday of the elderly Mr Pickwick, president of the fictional Pickwick Club, near the end of the Georgian era. In the *Pickwick Papers*, published in instalments between 1836 and 1837, Bath appears stuck in a bygone age. All the little rituals established in the 18th century have been carefully preserved, including the official welcome by the fabulously over-the-top Master of Ceremonies, Angelo Cyrus Bantam, Esq. At the Assembly Rooms everything seems arranged as it would have been 50 years earlier, except the ‘company’ are of a lower class and of more advanced years. We are, however, entertained to a romantic alternative version of the Bladud legend, and to a dinner party of the snobby local footmen, all in old-fashioned, brightly coloured liveries and powdered wigs.

Bath resurfaces in the literature of the mid-20th century in several of Georgette Heyer’s Regency romances, set among the upper classes. *Bath Tangle* of 1955, for example, allows readers to escape to an imagined age of order, politeness and elegance with the help of accurate references to political events, society news, and social conventions, and detailed descriptions of dress. Lady Serena and her recently widowed stepmother Lady Spenborough take a house in Laura Place, “a convenient situation”. They shop in Milsom Street, walk in Sydney Gardens and attend the Pump Room, and after a few complications both find their ideal new partner.

In the 1960s and 1970s Bath was in danger of losing much of its fine Georgian architecture to modern developments. The poet and writer John Betjeman was one of those who spoke out against the demolition of historic buildings, particularly in his poem *The Sack of Bath* of 1973.

“Goodbye to old Bath. We who loved you are sorry.
They’ve carted you off by developer’s lorry.”



In recent decades Bath has become the setting for Peter Lovesey’s much-enjoyed murder mysteries. They feature the indomitable Peter Diamond, renowned in his fictional professional circles for his “ability to find a rational scenario for extraordinary events”. In the 1990s stories, such as *The Last Detective* and *The Summons*, Bath’s Police Station is still in Manvers Street. By his most recent case, *Beau Death* of 2017, Bath detectives have moved to Concorde House in Bristol, much to Diamond’s irritation. But he is still called upon to solve the mystery of an 18th century skeleton in the attic of a house under demolition, at first rumoured to be that of Beau Nash. The plot thickens with a second murder, and following the investigation to its spectacular conclusion can easily serve as an alternative walking tour guide around Bath, with plenty of historically accurate details thrown in.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sabine Purshouse studied Literature at the Universities of Hannover, Glasgow and Bristol and taught in secondary, higher and further education. She enjoys researching literature and life in the Georgian era and sharing her findings with others