

# 7 The Old Swan

Walk 1: The Golden Age  
of the Victorian Spa Walk



It is sometimes forgotten that the Harrogate area was once at the centre of a thriving iron forging trade, but it was probably to serve workers in the iron trade that an inn became established, the exact origins of which are unknown. But by the late eighteenth century, the inn was operating under the name of the Smiths Arms, or occasionally, the Blacksmiths Arms.

At this time, the iron forging trade was only a remote memory, as the booming Spa was bringing a completely new clientele to the town, including visitors with money.

In 1878, the inn was purchased by a syndicate headed by the Cornish Doctor Veale, who had visited Smedley's Hydro at Matlock, and convinced himself that Harrogate could support a similar institution.

The new hydro rapidly became one of the town's top hotels, and catered to those Victorian clientele who took very seriously the rigours of the Spa "Cure", with its emphasis on plain living, exercise and fresh air, and lots of mineral water. It is interesting to recall that Karl Marx had visited the Swan Hotel in 1873. A bout of ill-health during his work in London caused an acquaintance to recommend a visit to the Yorkshire Spa.

The success of the "Harrogate Hydro" was so great that by April 1892, the hotel published detailed

improvement plans, which were on an impressive scale – including a noble new dining room with an impressive glass roof, a wintergarden constructed on the western wing of the establishment, and a further 75 bedrooms. With these improvements, the hotel had reached its maximum size and perfection, and was ready to take advantage of the Edwardian age's fashion for hotel life.

It was in 1927 that Agatha Christie made the Hydro her base for her temporary disappearance from public life. Great change came in 1939, when at the outbreak of the Second World War, the Hydro was requisitioned by the government to provide a home for the ministries and government departments evacuated from London.

The war over, the Harrogate Hydro was eventually handed back to its civilian owners, and in 1953, the old hotel reopened under a new name – the Old Swan Hotel.

