

8 The Stray

Walk 2: The Heart of
Harrogate Town walk



Before the year 1778, every square inch of the modern town of Harrogate and some of its surrounding communities were part of the great Royal Forest of Knaresborough.

It had probably been Henry II who created this Forest as a royal hunting ground sometime around the year 1100, but it was Henry IV who on the day of his 1399 coronation ordered that the Duchy of Lancaster (which for various reasons then controlled Knaresborough Forest) would only ever be owned by the monarch of the time. This is still true today.

Then, in 1571, William Slingsby discovered the mineral qualities of the Tewit Well and the public flocked in ever increasing numbers to drink from the several wells found within its bounds, providing the tenants of the Forest a good livelihood. Consequently, when the Crown decided to sell the Royal Forest of Knaresborough, the tenants panicked and feared for their future in case individuals might buy up the Forest and forbid the public further access to the wells.

To prevent this, Parliament agreed in an Act of 1770 to award the public not only the Wells at Harrogate, but also 200 acres of land surrounding the Wells, to ensure their protection and make land available for exercise. After specially appointed Commissioners had surveyed and measured the former Royal Forest, their Award came into effect in August 1778, when the 'Stray', was created.

To keep the grass on the Stray low for the convenience of the public, the Award created fifty "gate-holders" who, for payment of a fee, were allowed to pasture a set number of animals on the Stray.

Local owners of livestock prized this availability of extra grazing, so any reduction of it was resented. But the very success of the Stray in attracting people led to paths and roads wearing away the valuable greenery. This inconvenience was rectified by Parliament in 1789 with a second Act, granting an additional 20 acres of land to compensate the "gate-holders" for the loss of grazing caused by the new paths and roads, the additional 20 acres being taken from the slips along the main roads running into Harrogate.

It is now impossible to build anything on the Stray without a new act of Parliament. Over the years there have been various attempts to change it – either by planting flower beds or building a conference centre on it.

Where the wells brought the visitors, the Stray has allowed Harrogate to keep its Victorian grandeur and stay a place of special beauty. It is much treasured by the people who live here. Long may this be the case.