



# How the spa began.

Welcome to my historical walking tours of Harrogate.

This walk takes us through the golden age of Harrogate's Spa history. You are standing in the heart of Harrogate's Victorian Spa – around you are the grand Spa buildings with amenities to restore your health if you were one of the thousands who came to Harrogate in the nineteenth century to “take the waters”.

As we proceed, we will see buildings associated with pumping the waters for drinking purposes, bathing and other hydropathic treatments, great hotels to pamper visitors, and places of entertainment – entertainment being an important aspect of the Spa as a means of stress relief.

Harrogate's Spa dates back to 1571, when William Slingsby identified the springs of the Tewit Well as being an important mineral water. Fifty years later, visitors were flocking to Harrogate to drink the strong sulphur water, which still flows beneath the Royal Pump Room.

Further discoveries in the valley between what is now Crescent Gardens where you are standing and the so-called “Bogs Field” in Valley Gardens which you will visit on this walk gave the area an unsurpassed fame for the number and variety of its mineral wells.

The story of most of Harrogate's Spa buildings has

generally been one of ever bigger and better, so that at its peak, Harrogate was the UK's most advanced centre for hydrotherapy, a success that began in the Victorian age.

The first Spa building to be erected in this area was the Promenade Room, now the Mercer Art Gallery, which was opened in 1806. It is one of the stops on this tour so we will hear about that later.

Then, in 1834, the now demolished Victoria Baths were built by a speculating businessman on the western boundary of where you are standing.

Within a year of the opening of the old Victoria Baths in 1834, a rival businessman, who also owned the Crown Hotel, built his own suite of Baths in the Crown's gardens, the site now filled by the Royal Baths. These were known as the Crown, or Montpellier Baths, and were much bigger and more luxurious than the old Victoria Baths.

Between them, the privately owned Victoria and Montpellier Baths were at the heart of Harrogate's lucrative Spa business, a fact not lost on the Improvement Commissioners who ran the town between 1842 and 1884.

It was the Chairman of the Commissioners, Richard Ellis, who argued the case for Harrogate having its own suite of baths to provide an income for the town, and this resulted in the building of the New Victoria Baths which later became the council buildings called Crescent Gardens.

By the 1890's, tens of thousands of people were coming during the season which ran from May to September. Largely these were wealthy Victorians – prices were kept high to discourage the lower and middle classes from visiting the town.

Coming to the baths was seen as something exclusive. If you were standing here in the late 19th century you would have seen the great and the good of society promenading – Harrogate was somewhere to be

seen. During Queen Victoria's reign it was even said that a cabinet meeting could have been held in the town in the season.

Around this square is the Royal Baths – that offered the most exclusive treatments. Across the road is the Royal Hall where all the famous artists of the day held performances. We will hear of both later and also visit the grand hotels and the Royal Pump Room. You will learn about the development of a well-being industry that in its time could rival any luxury spa built today.

We start though at the now former council offices of Crescent Gardens that was once the New Victoria Baths and the beginning of the first set of medically planned treatment rooms.

If you turn to face the North side of the square –there is the large building in a typical neo-classical style of the 1930s with the town's latin moto inscribed in the gable "arx celebris fontibus" – to translate, "A citadel famous for its springs".

