

8 The Majestic

Walk 1: The Golden Age
of the Victorian Spa Walk



The building of two huge luxury hotels in Harrogate between 1899 and 1903 (the Grand and Majestic) was the sign not only of a booming visitor economy, but also of a change in taste, whereby guests wanted magnificent, if not ostentatious, accommodation.

The first of these, the Hotel Majestic, was opened on 18 July 1900. Unusually for stone-rich Harrogate, the new hotel was built with brick upon a stone plinth, and in a rather splendid act of showy ostentation, it was given a dome covered with glinting, gold leaf.

The owners, Frederick Hotels, made much of the fact that the hotel had been designed to emulate the rooms of a “nobleman’s palace”, with one splendid saloon leading into another. In the days when “being seen at one’s best” was important socially, the main entrance was at the back of the building, so that newly arrived guests (possibly wearing travel-stained or dishevelled garments) could sign in at reception before ascending to their rooms without undergoing the scrutiny from other guests assembled in the grand lounge. The entrance at the front of the building was only used when perfectly attired guests had the confidence to pass through the grand lounge and its rotating doors to the Majestic’s garden and the town centre.

In 1924, a serious fire destroyed the amazing smoking room that had been built around fittings from the

palace of Arabi Pasha, defeated by Sir Garnett Wolsey in 1882. Some 20 years later, the 8000 square foot Winter Garden, the largest in the north of England, was destroyed in a World War Two bombing raid.

By the end of the war, the Majestic had become very run down, thanks to its military occupation and the austerity of the time, and its future seemed bleak. Until 1959, Harrogate had no purpose-built exhibition hall, so when the Council first began to attract commercial exhibitions, huge buildings such as the Majestic were ideal for the purpose and it was often said that the Toy Fair saved the hotel.

Later decades saw extensive programmes of redecoration, as the hotel adjusted to the very changed standards of the second half of the twentieth century. Disaster occurred in May 2010, when a serious fifth floor fire nearly destroyed the hotel, which was extinguished by a force of ninety firemen from across the north of England. Since then, the Hotel has been restored, changed ownership, and restored again, and today, the Majestic is again regarded as one of Harrogate’s top addresses.