Harrogate Turkish Baths

a brief history
Harrogate Royal Baths and Turkish Baths

Father of Victorian Harrogate - Richard Ellis (Mayor 1884-87)

Richard Ellis was a self-made man who devoted himself to public affairs in Harrogate. His last great scheme was the promotion of the idea for an international-quality bathing and hydrotherapy centre which was to become the Royal Baths.

1897: Opening of the Royal Baths - home of Harrogate’s Turkish Baths and Health Spa

The Royal Baths were officially opened in 1897 and were said to be the most advanced centre for hydrotherapy in the world.

The Turkish Baths were only one of a vast number of facilities available during the spa’s heyday, including dispensing of medicinal waters, hydrotherapy departments, mud baths and steam rooms, as well as the full complement of consulting doctors. What may seem like a bizarre range of treatments today were household names then – including the likes of the ‘Plombière’ douche, Schnee (electric hydrotherapy) bath, saline sulphur and peat baths - (see photographs on the back of this leaflet).

The Royal Baths, one of Harrogate’s premier listed buildings, were built by Baggalley and Bristowe of London at a cost of £120,000.

The baths’ Moorish design with great Islamic arches and screens, walls of vibrant glazed brickwork, the arabesque painted ceilings and terrazzo floors (laid by the very best Italian experts) all add to its historic fantasy qualities.

The baths were popular with members of Royal families from around the world and a particular favourite of Queen Victoria’s granddaughters.

Although Turkish Baths were common in Victorian times, today only seven remain which date back to the 19th century. Three of them, including Harrogate, are in England (the Victorian Health Suite in Carlisle and the Health Hydro in Swindon are the others). But none is as historically complete and in full working order as Harrogate’s Turkish Baths. Their importance lies in their decoration, elaboration and rarity.

The waters of Harrogate

Discovery of the springs of Harrogate dates back about four centuries; Harrogate is unique as a spa town because of the wide variety of waters.

The mineral waters supplied to the baths originally came from The Montpellier Estate. The saline sulphur bath was the treatment on which Harrogate’s reputation was built. It consisted of two waters -
saline sulphur water and alkaline sulphur water. The first was good for gout, rheumatism and hepatic disorders; the second mainly used to treat skin diseases.

1914: The First World War brings social change

Although the number of wealthy visitors coming to Harrogate to ‘take the waters’ declined, those of middle income increased. Harrogate spa was the only one in England to make a profit during the inter-war years.

1969: Closure of treatment centre

The decline of spa visiting due to the emergence of modern treatments and technology finally led to the closure of Harrogate’s treatment centre.

2002 - 2004: Phased redevelopment of the Royal Baths

Like many large Victorian buildings, the Royal Baths were in need of a major cash injection. After many unsuccessful attempts to market the building to the health and leisure industry in the late 1990s (including turning into a casino), a development deal was struck between Harrogate Borough Council and Scottish Life. That partnership has seen £10m invested in the Royal Baths building - including a £1m refurbishment of the Turkish Baths, which have been restored to their glittering Victorian beginning. The council also attracted grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Essentially, the baths are intact and very little alteration has taken place over the years. The nature of the materials used - hard, brightly coloured glazed bricks; mosaic floors and fine polished hardwoods - mean the interior always looks new, fresh and bright.

The Turkish Baths have been used for films - including Dustin Hoffman’s ‘Agatha’ detailing Agatha Christie’s mysterious disappearance and later discovery in Harrogate, Malcolm McLaren’s video for his ‘Madam Butterfly’ recording and E17’s video for their record ‘Steam’.

They have been used for many TV productions and photo shoots.

Harrogate Borough Council maintains and manages the Turkish Baths and, in today’s world, they continue to offer relaxation from the stresses and strains of everyday life - for full details of what’s on offer, pick up a leaflet or go to www.turkishbathsharrogate.co.uk Tel 01423 556746.
Aix douche.
Cold douche.
Peat bath.
Sulphur bath.
Schnee (electric hydrotherapy) bath.

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