

## **THE MECCA OF THE AILING: THE PLAYGROUND OF THE ROBUST**

**BY RICHARD THOMAS**

When the Great War ended on 11.11.11 Harrogate awoke to the realisation that the pre-war aristocratic world, for which many of our great buildings were constructed, had changed for ever.

The Harrogate Medical Society was a powerfully minded 'action group' who wasted no time in prodding the Town Council into action.

Many of the medical men lived in the Duchy, which itself is close to the Spa area. Residents included the splendidly named Mr C D'Oyly Grange OBE at 3 Clarence Drive, three Doctors Rutherford at 12 York Road, two further medical men in York Road, two in Swan Road and further clusters in Ripon Road and Springfield Avenue.

In September 1919 they recommended better ways of dealing with patients at the Royal Baths, more lavatories, controlling the fees of taxi drivers and also several matters in which we are still interested today, such as better road surfacing and better rail connections.

There was clearly no interest whatsoever in prescribing to a pill popping population and 'The Cure' in all its pre-war splendour was what they required.

The Council embarked on some serious development. In 1921, close to our own area they demolished the houses on Well Hill, ie on the left of Cornwall Road. This resulted in a much more pleasing entrance being created for the Valley Gardens. The gardens were further enhanced by the gracious sun colonnade and the Sun Pavilion in 1933.

In 1924 many of the 89 medicinal wells were re-constituted in bedrock and most were piped to the Royal Baths' magnificent central hall (now a Chinese Restaurant) and the gardens

surrounding the wells were laid out in much their present form. A bowling green and miniature golf and putting greens were created.

In the inter-war period the town continued to be the leading spa and made a small profit, unlike Bath, Cheltenham and Llandrindod Wells, probably due to the varied and up-to-date treatments available at Harrogate.

‘The Mecca of the Ailing’ was still able to produce the goods but diversification was required to ensure that we were also ‘The Playground of the Robust’. This phrase appears in a booklet produced by the Royal Baths’ Director, Mr Broome.

Tennis was a big contributor to this image and several of the Duchy’s larger houses had their own courts. The Council built ‘en tout cas’ courts in the Valley Gardens to create an additional facility to those already in the Royal Hall Rose Gardens. The Davis Cup was played there in 1926. My great aunt’s 1929 diary records the Royal Show being on the Stray during July 1929. In those days the Show circulated round the country. The Great Yorkshire Show likewise, circulated around the whole of Yorkshire until after the Second War, when it settled in Harrogate.

Oakdale Golf Club was also a splendid location for the robust and the social. My mother won a gold medal there in the 1930’s and her diary records many Friday night dances.

Duchy people were only too happy to be sociable and did not confine themselves to their immediate area. I have recorded a recollection of the importance of The Sports Club in Firs Road as a regular sporting and social venue. This was managed by two splendid ladies, Pill and Moira O’Kelly. My mother also records winning the 1929 Doubles at the Wayside Gardens Tennis Club. Another memory is of a West Riding wool spinner who inhabited one of the larger Duchy houses and who would, on a Saturday, regularly advise his friends that he would be opening a bottle of champagne at noon.

Later in the day the population may have resorted to the Cinema. Many of these were built individually in the town, in contrast to the present concept of several screens in one building. The Central Cinema arrived in 1920 (now the Oxford Street end of Marks & Spencer) and The Scala in Cambridge Street (later re-named The Gaumont). The Regal was built adjacent to St Peter's Church in 1937 on the site of the original St Peter's School.

A great deal of housing was constructed between the wars, including the Oakdale housing estate, built by the Council on the slope of Jenny Plain in Ripon Road. This location was not so affected by the smell from the Retort House and oxide beds as were the row of brick houses built by the Gas Company on to their Retort House, facing on to Ripon Road. They had no rear doors or rear windows and had a cast iron plaque proclaiming 'GASVILLE TERRACE'. One old lady who lived there for 50 years said that 'she never noticed the smell'.

Up the hill the completion of St Wildrid's church proceeded apace under the care of Leslie Moore (son in law of Temple Moore the architect, who had died at the end of the Great War). In 1932 an inheritance from Mr W Gunn enabled the Gunn Memorial Hall to be built with a famous German Modernism 'Lamella' roof. The hall is panelled in limed oak and is joined to the church by a cloister.

Harrogate's visitors and the town's capacity to respond to their requirements took a severe knock when a panic on the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929 set off a great international economic crisis.

The visitors to the Spa for the three week 'cure' began to have other things on their minds than the efficacy of the waters upon their constipation and the many diseases which a revered medical man, Sir Arbuthnot Lane, said were produced by the complaint.