

RENOVATION OF PITTVILLE PUMP ROOM AND ITS REOPENING

By Ashley Rossiter

The Pittville Pump Room stands today as a monument of regency splendour, unquestionably one of Cheltenham's most beautiful buildings. It was constructed between 1825-30 as the centrepiece of what was supposed to be a magnificent estate financed by the minor local politician and speculative property developer Joseph Pitt.¹ In a town famous across England for its spa waters, Pittville was the most ambitious and exclusive venue for sampling the waters. It had been planned as a U-shape of Grecian villas with the Pump Room as its focal point, serving in its traditional role as a spa as well as a community centre. However as the 19th century continued the demand for spa water decreased. The Pump Room no longer generated as much interest or revenue as in its heyday. It was not just that the spa was becoming moribund, but the estate as a whole had failed to prosper, of the 600 houses intended only 100 had been built by 1830. This was because of the more successful town pleasure grounds of Montpellier and the financial crisis that hit Britain in 1825-26, which was precipitated by unsound foreign investment. In 1826 houses would sell only for one third of their 1825 value.² Eventually in 1889 the borough council bought the building for £5,400 from the County of Gloucester bank which had acquired it in 1842 as part of Joseph Pitt's debt ridden estate.³ It survives today, in the council's ownership, a bastion of Greek revival topping the hill slope in Pittville Park.

It did not take long for the Borough Council to realise that it had acquired a building with structural inadequacies. It was in constant need of restoration. In 1937 the Parks Committee instructed the Borough Surveyor, Mr G. Gould Marsland to conduct major works to combat the problems that had developed.⁴ It would take three years to restore the main timber supports, which were infested with rot at the point where they rested on the abutments and replace decayed stone work. Other work consisted of reconstructing the colonnade roof, removal of Gahagan's badly eroded statues and repairs to the loggia.⁵ Completion of the restoration coincided with the outbreak of war in Europe and in June the following year the Pump Room was requisitioned under the *Emergency Powers Defence Act (1939)* and was occupied as part of the United States Army's service of supply for European operations.⁶ It was used for storage on the ground floor and on

the upper floor as officers' accommodation. The Borough Surveyor was instructed by the Parks and Recreation Grounds Committee to keep records of the condition of the building whilst it was in military hands. However, the military authorities during their occupation refused to allow periodical inspections and when eventually an inspection was allowed it was limited in its detail. His first report on the 9th March 1942 noted that the surfacing in front of the Pump Room was worn and in places was showing signs of disintegration. Also, the portico on each side was walled in with brickwork to offer more storage accommodation and some stone columns had been chipped at their bases from collision with the tailboards of lorries unloading supplies.⁷ At this stage he did not deem any of the damage to be irreparable after hostilities. When a thorough inspection did take place after the war it showed that the building had suffered to a greater extent than initially thought. Though the Luftwaffe had not dropped a single bomb on the Pump Room the war had still taken its toll. On the 12th May 1945 the military authorities offered £442 15s. 0d. for dilapidation. A brief post WWII inspection had showed the damage far exceeded what the military authorities offered to pay in compensation. The Borough Surveyor reported that considerable dampness had been allowed to go untreated throughout the interior. Fungi had become deeply rooted in the bond timbers and dry rot had led to the degeneration of the masonry. The Parks and Recreation Grounds Committee resolved that a complete review of the building should be conducted. Following this there was to be renewed negotiations for a more adequate figure than £442.⁸ Although £442 was considered insufficient it is important to note that the military authorities had been paying £200 for rent of the Pump Room and £14 for the adjoining Marle Hill fields for each of the five years they were stationed there.⁹ Even though the offer was increased, the de-requisition still caused two major problems for the Borough Council. Firstly, could enough funding be raised for restoration and what level of restoration was needed? Secondly, even if adequate funding could be raised, would the Pump Room be in future an asset to Cheltenham and therefore justify its restoration?

On closer inspection from Robert Paterson, the Gloucestershire Architectural Association's (G.A.A.) representative to the newly formed Pittville Pump Room Committee, it was confirmed that dry rot had indeed encroached into structural areas of the



Removal of plaster to expose the dry rot

building, of which Paterson was able to identify four major examples. First was in the main hall underlying the plaster vaulting, then in the spa room which was the result of a faulty lead rain water pipe. The penultimate example was in the north-eastern corner of the King's Room and finally in the small rooms above the King's Room.¹⁰ However, the biggest problem was that the supporting members that crossed the main hall appeared to have sagged.¹¹ Paterson felt unable to place an accurate figure on the estimated cost of restoring the main structural abnormalities but gave a very provisional estimate of £3,000. This figure excluded the massive redecoration costs if they were to be undertaken.

The Pittville Pump Room Committee warmly received the report of the Panel of the G.A.A. and came to the conclusion that the Pump Room, with its architectural and historical importance, should be preserved for the town. This conclusion was reinforced with the pending 1951 Festival of Britain commemoration in two years time. It was the policy of the Festival of Britain organisers to encourage and support proposals of local authorities to construct a new building, or alternatively, the restoration of an old building. Either option would have to be a valuable contribution the town's amenities and its splendour. Mr Gerald Barry, the Director General of the festival, together with members of the Arts Council visited Cheltenham, one of the principle venues of the event, and was enthusiastic about the proposals to rejuvenate the Pump Room. It was therefore the Committee's proposal that the approval of the Arts Council be

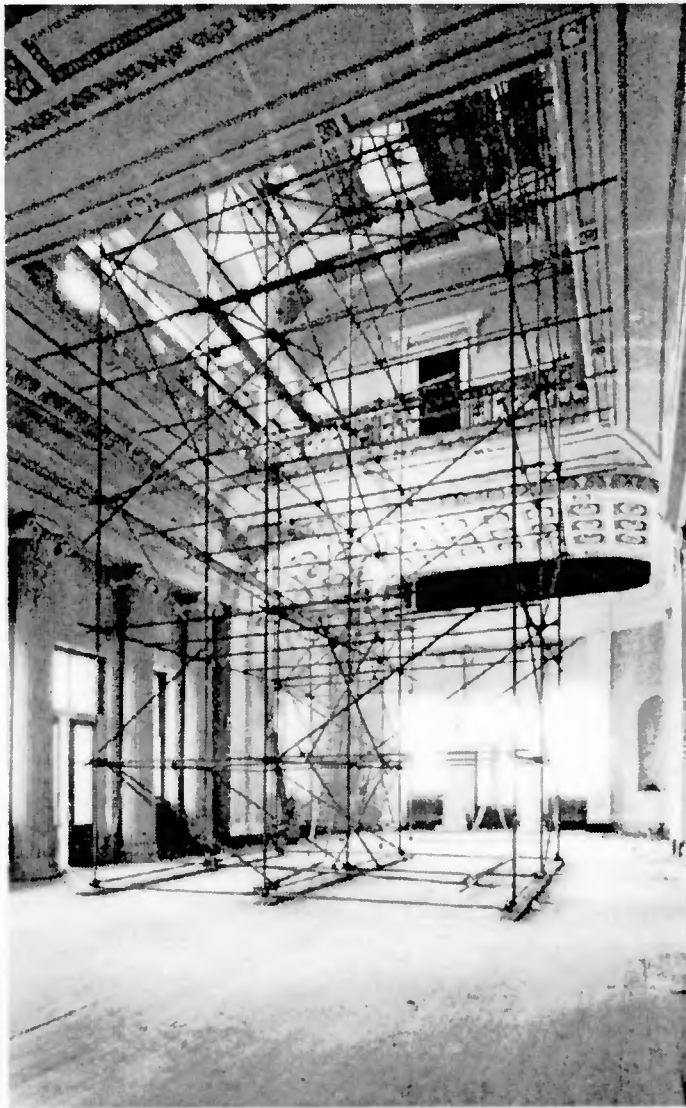
sought and every effort made to complete the scheme in time for the opening of the Festival.¹² It was understood at this stage that £10,000 would be needed for improvements and alterations on top of the £3,000 estimated for the essential repairs. In light of this, the Pittville Pump Room Committee on the 3rd February 1950 decided to commence with the latter part of the scheme, whilst postponing the more expensive and controversial costs for improvements and alterations.¹³

Now that expenditure for the essential repairs was ratified the future of the Pump Room was assured, in a structural sense at least. It had not been decided what sort of future this would involve. The committee felt that the building should be made something more than a place of architectural and historic interest. It must have been aware that neither the Council nor the townspeople would look favourably upon expenditure of £3,000 plus annual maintenance charges, for the mere preservation of the building. However, before debating how much should and could be made available for redecoration and alterations it had to be established in what capacity the Pump Room was to be used.

It can be concluded from the Pittville Pump Room Committee minutes of the 3rd February 1950 that it was undecided as to what role the building should play. It seems that two opposing opinions had formed, aside from a third opinion of those who supported demolition! Some saw the future of the Pump Room as a more formal arena with facilities for functions and conferences and others proposed a more community orientated centre, a place for indoor sports such as badminton. Whilst the Committee was considering the purposes to which the premises in their unique setting might most usefully be put, it was simultaneously researching avenues to fund any proposed plans.

Once again the Borough Council asked the Borough Surveyor, working in conjunction with the now affiliated R. W. Paterson from the G.A.A., to conduct feasibility studies into the future uses and the costs involved. Paterson's report 'Potentialities for the Pump Room'¹⁴ reviewed the possibilities for various types of events. For example the Main Hall, excluding the Spa room, could accommodate 180 couples for a dance, or 450 people for a meeting. The oval room could hold 70 people at small tables if it was used as a buffet, the east room over the main hall could seat 60 at small tables for dining and the west room could accommodate 100 for a meeting. Judging from these examples Paterson sights in his report it is not difficult to see the direction Paterson felt should be taken once the

essential repairs had been done. He reinforces this argument when he writes that because of the architectural qualities, its best use might be for conferences, meetings and social gatherings, rather than for badminton and comparable sports. In whichever shape the restoration took, Paterson believed the main problem was still competing with the gardens in Montpellier for the town's affection. The town centre is the focal point for any town, from the town centre it was a short walk up a clearly defined beautifully designed promenade to Montpellier. Along this walk, not more than a mile or so, there was time to rest at one of the parks along the way or visit the specialist-shopping district.



Restoration work in progress

Comparatively, the route to Pittville was an arduous affair, the distances involved were longer and the walk did not cover such aesthetically pleasing passages as the tree lined roads that led to Montpellier. The G.A.A felt that improved access from the middle of town and persuading people that the Pittville was worth visiting were the two most

important ingredients to increase visitor numbers in the future. The G.A.A. also accused the Council of failing adequately to promote Pittville in the past and said it would have to take a more active role in endorsing its splendour. It was the belief of the G.A.A that the unevenness of the dichotic Spa town could be re-balanced by trusting in the architectural attributes of Pittville Pump Room and exploiting this appeal.¹⁵

There were those who perceived the Pump Room filling an entirely different role than the Borough Surveyor and the G.A.A. After the war and before its restoration the Pump Room was used for many community events of the more recreational and educational nature. As early as 10th January 1949 the Ginner School of Dance and Drama asked to lease the building to accommodate their expanding school. In the same year the Pump Room was let in the evenings to the New Club and Spa Badminton Club. However, there were limits, an application for a basketball team to play in the main hall, popular with ex-service men, was rejected on the grounds that they might smash a window or break the newly erected lighting. Other community events followed including the Old Peoples' Clubs Garden Party, with a fancy dress parade and various competitions. The Stroud and District Canine Society applied to hold their annual show at the Pump Room. The Parks and Recreation Grounds Committee agreed but placed the fee for the event at a healthy £5 5s. 0d. which reflected the growing desirability of the building.¹⁶

After consideration at its meeting on 17th July 1950 the Pump Room Committee, albeit with strong opposition, proposed to the Borough Council that the Pump Room should be used in accordance with the G.A.A. suggestions. This plan involved a total restoration requiring redecoration would be required and substantial expenditure. Accounting for a large share of the cost was central heating being installed, the building of lavatories on a new middle floor, a food store and kitchen extension and the replacement of the decayed removed statues with ones to represent the new role of the Pump Room. The Borough Finance Committee however, insisted that such expenditure would have to be reviewed and postponed any further expenditure for 12 months. It was not just the Finance Committee that was expressing discontent at the spiralling costs but a strong local lobby of opinion was developing that thought the town would be better off financially if the Pump Room was demolished.¹⁷ In a letter to the editor of the *Cheltenham Chronicle*, a reader described his discontent for the amount of money being spent on the Pump Room when so many of the

town's other amenities were in disrepair.¹⁸ *Country Life* in July 1960 recalled that from the onset there were some who believed that it warranted no funding at all. 'After a spell of military occupation, it stood sadly decayed and disregarded. There were some that thought it a 'white elephant' and advocated its demolition'.¹⁹

PITTVILLE PUMP ROOM

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Brochure for the newly restored Pittville Pump Room

The divisions on the issue infiltrated to the heart of the Borough Council. Influential Alderman and ex M.P. D. L. Lipson was one of the first to speak out publicly with his remarks in the *Gloucestershire Echo*, "There is a possibility of this Council being led against its better judgement, into an expenditure on the Pump Room that we cannot afford". He also believed that the reason the Pump Room had fallen into disrepair was because the "fundamental structure" was "bound inevitably to decay".²⁰ Although there was some concern about the structural qualities it was the costs involved to rejuvenate it entirely and the losses it would make post completion that created the strongest opposition. As Councillor Charles Irving commented in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* "Most of the municipal enterprises providing social amenities

already run at a loss. The Pump Room will merely increase this deficit".²¹ With the same earnest enthusiasm the pro lobby set about their campaign. The Mayor, P. T. Smith, described the Pump Room as a "Priceless heritage which must not be neglected". The succeeding Mayor, Theo L. Thompson, was to instigate the 'Save the Pump Room' appeal, which attempted to raise a public subscription for the Pump Room as well as encouraging other donations.²² This made a significant impact on the decision to continue with the restoration; public subscription assisted financially at a time when, due to the economic pressures on the country, public spending was discouraged. To add to this dilemma, it transpired that no money would be offered to them from either the Arts Council or the Festival of Britain Committee which made all the donations even more essential.

Despite the protests the Council voted for restoration and the Pump Room was eventually finished at a total cost of £43,250. This included the cost of total redecoration, modern heating and lighting, and the development of entrance foyer and catering facilities. A proportion of the £43,250 funding came from grants from the Pilgrim Trust, as well as the Ministry of Works acting on advice from the Historic Buildings Council.²³ There were also a number of notable private donations aside from the public subscription. In June 1952 the prefect from Pates Grammar School for Girls informed the mayor of the formation of the school's Pump Room fund. It would raise money by holding dances there. The largest individual donations came from the Councillor Miss E.K Bayliss, to the sum of £1,000 in 1952, and from Mr L. G. Northcroft who donated the installation of the wooden floor in the main hall and three fine chandeliers. However, despite the generosity of the donors, the rate payers were to foot the largest proportion of the bill. All the donations, grants and public subscription accumulated to £14,866 leaving the rate payers to make up the £28,384.

Study of the Park and Recreation Grounds Committee minutes from the 12th July 1960 show that although the Pump Room had been restored, its future was still unclear. The County Council was offering to lease the Pump Room at £720 per annum plus the rates. The County Council would *de facto* be in control of the building and allow its use to the Borough on occasions. To many in the town this was wrong. It must have seemed that all the hard work they had placed in the renovation was being hijacked. Mr L. G. Northcroft felt so passionately

about the issue that his donation was dependent on the outcome. In a statement to the Town Clerk he declared that "If the Borough Council retained full possession of the Pump Room and leased it to the County Council on occasions, then his offer to pay for the new floor stood. It was only if the control of the building passed to the County Council that he would not be interested".²⁴

Control of the Pump Room affairs reverted back to the Parks and Recreation Grounds Committee, which faced three options, each with variant financial implications. Firstly, in the event of the main hall being leased to the County Council, with the Borough Council having occasional use, it would result in a yearly deficit of £1,000. Secondly, if the control of the Pump Room was retained by the Borough Council and made available to the County Council when required then there was the probable loss of £2,000. Finally, the Borough believed that if it retained full control and used it for entertainment and other community activities then the annual deficit would be something over £3,000. The Borough Council decided on the second option and retained control.²⁵ Leasing the upper floor to the Gloucestershire County Council for use by the Gloucestershire College of Art.²⁶

The official reopening of the Pittville Pump Room fell on the 4th July 1960. The guest of honour was the Duke of Wellington, which was considered fitting due to his more famous ancestor's visit and the current Duke's well renowned knowledge of the arts. He praised the work of restoration and said that he felt a magnificent feat had been accomplished despite "the terrible vicissitudes of war".²⁷ The Mayor and the Duke wanted to use the opening celebration as a platform for future restoration projects within the town. The Duke also encouraged Cheltenham to apply for a Preservation Act to protect its architecture, the same status that Bath had received.²⁸ Special thanks was paid to Robert Paterson the supervising architect throughout the renovation and Messrs H. H. Martyn Ltd, who were known all over the world for their architectural decoration, also played an important role in the fine new decorative interior.

When visiting the Pump Room today it is difficult to comprehend that there ever was any argument against the decision to save the building. This is not to deny the mammoth task that lay before those who were to devote years of their lives, neither to underestimate the financial burden of the ratepayer or the generosity of the patrons. It is difficult to comprehend because it might have so easily gone the other way. One is left to wonder whether in

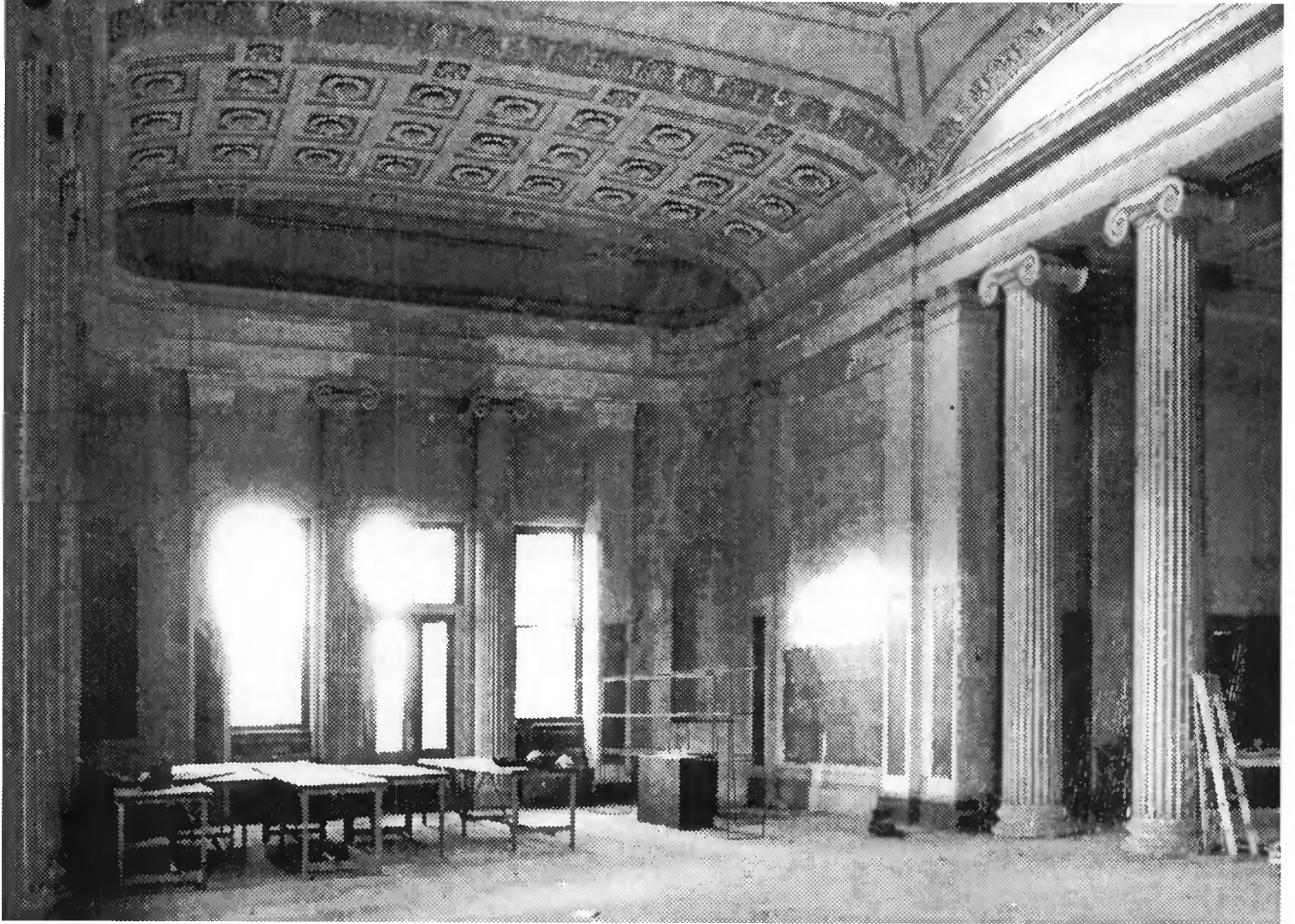
similar circumstances other treasures have been lost. The Pump Room stands as a victory of such a debate, a testament to hard work and perseverance, a monument to the strong attachment to the sublime and the beautiful, but most of all a protest to the ever encroaching, functional modernity of ill-thought-out structural monstrosities appearing across the country.

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Acknowledgement

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Pittville Pump Room interior during restoration
in the 1950s

[Image from front cover]