

GLOUCESTER SPA

BY Barbara Drake

To find that Gloucester was once a fashionable Spa town in the early 19th Century possibly comes as a surprise to some people.

Cheltenham Spa – where there are still some Pump Rooms standing, even some spa water to drink, but Gloucester...? We know Spa Road, and indeed there are elegant buildings there and in Brunswick Square, but where was the Spa itself? Now it is just “the site of” and one acorn vase, in Spa Road. And the lions from the Pump Room adorn the gates at Ribston Hall.

The story began in Lower Westgate Street in an area that, too, has been changed beyond recognition. But many readers may remember The Duke of Norfolk’s Lodgings. As a result of many years of neglect and several years as a doss-house, decay set in, but its former elegance could still be seen behind the crumbling facade and corrugated iron shop fronts. Here in 1798 Charles, 11th Duke of Norfolk, rented a fine house for his second term of office as Mayor of Gloucester. He was actually elected on four occasions, but only resided here in the city once. His association with Gloucester began with his marriage in 1771 into the Scudamore family, large landowners at Newark House, Hempstead.



Charles, 11th Duke of Norfolk.

Formerly known as Eagle House, it was built by a clergyman named Freeman in the 18th century. When a spring of saline water was discovered, and by 1788 promoted as a financial proposition, its name changed to Spa House. This was the first spring of its type to be found in the city and was actually discovered when the house was built, yet, despite the developments in Cheltenham around saline springs discovered there the elderly Freemans took no notice, though they were aware of its medicinal properties, and its uselessness for normal domestic purposes.

Mr Lewis, a cornfactor and tenant in 1787 found it

spoilt clothes when used for washing, ruined tea making and brewing operations, and, worst of all did not mix well with brandy. However, he did notice that his wife found relief from a nervous disorder and his daughter relief from a skin complaint.

“From this time it was suggested to Mr Lewis to have the water conveyed into a small room by means of pipes, which he did, then advertised its virtues and free access to all who came; and upon a moderate calculation, as I am told, 400 persons assembled a day, most of whom received great benefit and many cures were accomplished. Since last summer there has been added a very large and commodious pump room for the nobility and gentry; the former pump being reserved for the poor, who by applying will still receive great attention as before” (*Gloucester Journal*, 10 Aug. 1789).

“Gloucester Spa. The Proprietor begs leave to inform the Nobility and Gentry of this city, and its environs that this day (Mon. 10th) the Long Room in the Garden will be opened for their accommodation with tea and coffee, morning and afternoon. Newspapers will be regularly taken in Lodgings and Board at the Spa” (*Gloucester Journal*, 10 Aug. 1789).

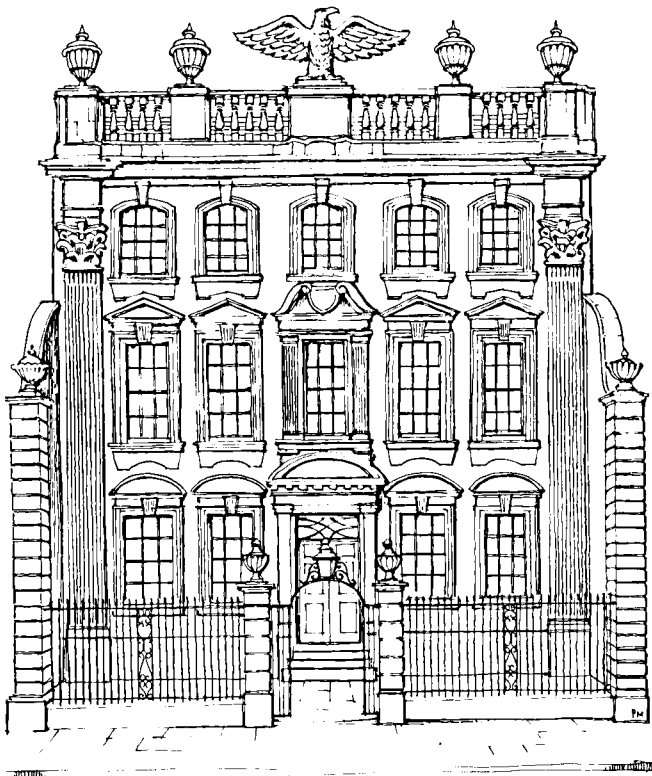
“Gloucester Spa, Hotel and Tavern in Westgate St. The Proprietors... beg leave... that the Hotel is neatly fitted up for the reception as such as pleases to honour them with their company... Good stabling and coach houses. Genteel apartments to Let for the music meeting. There will be a Public Breakfast on Tuesday at 1/- a head. The garden will be open every day for the reception of company, and Tea provided morning and evening at 8d a head”. (*Gloucester Journal*, 30 Aug. 1790).

Quite how long the waters continued to be taken there as a fashionable, social and health event is unclear, but from Directories we find the premises variously described: –

- 1824 Spa House Preparatory School and Finishing Academy.
- 1827 The Spa Hotel and Boarding House.
- 1880 The Old Spa House... was converted into barracks for the 14th Light Dragoons and 8th Hussars.

Lee’s Directory shows that by 1902 it had become a common Lodging House, and it was demolished for major city alterations on October 4 1971.

In 1814 a new spring was discovered, this time south-east of the city centre, in what was more or less open ground owned by Sir James Jelf, known as Rignor Stile Grounds. In the title deeds for Sherbourne House, Spa Road, Gloucester, the history of the ownership of the ground may be traced. In 1646 5 inclosures of land commonly called Rignes Styles Ground exchanged



Eagle House, reconstruction drawing by Philip Moss.

hands from John Browne, former alderman of the city, deceased, to John Harris and John Slater, girdlers, of London.

Exchanges continued to take place over the years and names such as Wagstaffe's of Ladybellegate House fame, and Robert Raikes, 1737-42, were added to the list. In 1745 it was described as 'pasture ground,' Rignes Style Grounds with cowhouse, now only 4 or 5 pastures without the Southgate at the lower end of Littleworth'.

In 1815 it came into the ownership of James Jelf and Charles Evans, who had for several years carried on the business of bankers within the city in co-partnership with William Fendall, under the title of the Gloucester Old Bank, in Westgate Street. Jelf could see great financial potential in this lucky find on his land and exploited it immediately and, though he was at the time in severe financial strain, as were many bankers at the time, due to the Napoleonic Wars, Charles Evans helped him out.

Initially a temporary Pump Room was built over a small spring in Parkers Row (Brunswick Road). On November 17, 1814 the foundation stone was laid for the Pump Room and Parkers Row was widened to provide a handsome approach. This room was 40' by 20' wide and had hot and cold vapour baths "new in this part of the country, and from their valuable medicinal properties we doubt not the importance of such accommodations". Dr. Accurn was called upon to analyse the waters which were found to be of excellent quality, even with detectable amounts of iodine traced for the first time. Also at this time, a piece of land, formerly part of Gaudy Green (later to become Brunswick Square) were added to the original 'pasture' and this was now thrown open too.

On May 1 1815 the new pump room was officially opened with a certain amount of razzamataz – the venture looked well on its way to success, and it was

reported optimistically that several thousand people had taken the waters. Walks were laid out and well used and a band of the South Gloucester Militia played every Monday morning at the Pump Room entrance.

But during 1815 Sir James' world tottered and fell, taking with it Gloucester Spa. Bankruptcy forced him to retire as Mayor. He hoped that family friends might rally round and buy up the venture, but by 26 June 1815 *The Gloucester Journal* was advertising the sale of the pump room, baths, saline waters and walks. The whole property raised £9,500, with the main Spa area, pump room and walks being sold to Mr Philpotts for £7,500.

By 7 August 1815 a committee was set up to run the Spa, consisting of many public spirited individuals and plans were made to sink a new well as the original supplies were insufficient for demand. New walks were to be laid out and the area developed for hotels and houses.

In September 1817 John Chadborn, a city property developer, contracted with the Gloucester Spa Company to purchase several parcels of land for £250. He was a close associate of Jeremy Wood, manager of Gloucester Old Bank, and was later to become involved in the litigation over the disputed will of Wood.

In March 1819 William Hicks, a noted builder, took land to the west and early in 1824 the Committee was resolved it would ensure consistency in the architectural designs of all the buildings planned for the Spa area, and the most significant developments were carried out in 1829 starting with the Beaufort Buildings.

The Judges' Lodgings in Spa Road were designed by Sir Robert Smirke for John Philpotts (Smirke was also the designer of the British Museum in London, and, on a smaller scale the Shire Hall in Gloucester in 1816). This was originally called Somerset House or Somerset Villas when it was two semi-detached houses.

No. 25 Spa Road, 'Sherbourne House', was built for John Chadborn, whose daughter, Frances, married William Price of Tibberton Court. (Peter Price, the Gloucester Civic Trust archivist provided access to the Sherbourne House deeds). In 1982 Colin Barnett bought this property, then in an advanced state of decay. Since the completion of a £140,000 project in 1984, it provides 10 one and two bedrooomed flats.

Next to No. 17, The Register Office in 1986, lies the former Ribston Hall, now part of the Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology. In 1829 it is recorded that 'a spacious and elegant mansion has lately been erected near The Spa by John Philpotts esq.' called Ribston Hall, it later flourished as The Spa Hotel and in 1860 became a School for the Board and Education of Young Ladies, described thus: –

'Ribston Hall is delightfully situated in Spa Road in a very healthy locality and contains well ventilated school, classrooms, dormitories and baths with every convenience for the comfort of a large Establishment. The health, together with the religious and moral training of the pupils, are of first importance, while due regard is paid to the formation of their manners, tastes and habits...'

'The course of instruction comprises the several branches of a superior English Education, together with German, French and Italian languages: Music, vocal and instrumental, Drawing, Dancing etc...'

However, by this time this area was developing in importance with an increase in the number of new houses in the city from 1,366 in 1801 to 2,163 in 1831,

important industrial developments in the city were adding to the increase in population from 7,261 in 1801 to 11,933 in 1831. From the birth of an idea in 1793 to its construction and opening in 1826, the Gloucestershire and Berkeley Canal brought industry and trade, and therefore jobs to a city that until the 1800s was dealing with very small scale trade, such as printing, bell founding, pinmaking and the leather industry.

Even the Port of Gloucester was of little importance with Bristol handling such a tonnage of potential trade. But now the timber trade especially brought an immense change to the Bristol Road area very close by, which was to have a far reaching effect on Gloucester Spa.

After the mid 1800s the functions of Spas generally seemed on the decline, and they became health resorts rather than places for social gatherings. The Victorians were obsessed with health and places like Malvern, Bath and Cheltenham could become Health Spas in clean attractive countryside, where one could promenade and take not just "the waters" but also "the air". This really brings home the inevitable failure of Gloucester Spa as a Health Resort. More and more the city was increasing in industrial manufacture with resultant air pollution and disturbance.

The year 1860 is significant in two ways. It saw the birth of the Gloucester Railway Carriage and Wagon Company Ltd. (originally created to make coal wagons) in Bristol Road, very close to The Spa. Ironically, the Railways, which originally helped bring people to the Spa, was also to help destroy it. 1860 saw The Spa Company offering their property to the City, on condition that the Board of Health added land, and that the whole area was to be laid out as a park for the general use of the public. After some difference of opinion how the land was to be used, Gloucester Park was established.

In 1862 the Board of Health placed a tap outside the Pump Room for the public to drink from free of charge, although one could continue to take the waters inside at the counter at 1d per glass or 2/6d per year. In 1863 only annual subscribers could make use of the indoor facilities.

About 1900 the original baths were removed and not replaced. The waters were still then available and in

1905 it was suggested – without avail – that the Spa should be revived on a municipal basis. But a few years later effluent from a cracked sewer was found to have seeped into the water supply and the water was rendered unfit for drinking.

In 1946 the municipal suggestion was revived. It was a scheme thought up by Mayor Williams soon after the war ceased. On the Spa site was to be built an Assembly Hall and Theatre as a War Memorial, at a cost of £100,000 raised by subscription and voluntary means. Primarily it was going to be Gloucester's own effort to raise a fitting memorial to those fell in the war, and at the same time provide amenities which the city needed.

The suggested plans, from a newspaper article dated 19 June 1946, show an L-shaped building with an imposing forecourt and entrance from Spa Road opposite Brunswick Road. There was a large foyer at the angle of the L which would serve both the assembly Hall and the Theatre, each of which formed the arm of the L: the Assembly Hall being parallel with Spa Road. These plans obviously never came to fruition.

Finally in 1960 the Pump Room with its veranda and its parapet, adorned with carved lions and acorn vases, had to be demolished. There had been talk of spending £600 on repairs, but when it was discovered that extensive damage by dry rot meant a new roof at a cost of £3,000, its fate was sealed.

The building was included in the list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest scheduled for preservation under the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. There had been a possibility that the Ministry of Works or the Georgian Group might have been prepared to make grant towards the cost of restoration, but no action was taken other than its demolition.

Principal sources:—

Gwen Hart, *A History of Cheltenham*, 1965.

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My thanks to the City Library staff, and to Mr Peter Price for allowing access to the deeds of Sherbourne House.



The Spa Pump Room.