



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

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GEORGIAN TOWNS AS HEALTH AND PLEASURE RESORTS

Sylvia McIntyre

ONE ASPECT OF THE GEORGIAN TOWN which has recently come under consideration is its role as a centre for consumption as well as production, including the consumption of leisure in the form of both goods and services. London, as in many matters, was pre-eminent as a social centre, but the eighteenth century saw the spread of desirable amenities such as theatres, assembly rooms and concert halls (not to mention promenades and racecourses), to a large number of provincial towns. For many such towns, offering a social centre for inhabitants and neighbourhood was only one of their roles, but to certain ones it became a primary or at least major reason for their prosperity or in some cases, their existence. These were the watering places, the term covering both spas and seaside resorts which flourished predominately as health and pleasure resorts, growing with the increased numbers and wealth of the upper and middling classes. In terms of the actual population figures for those places which could be classed as resorts, these towns do not compare with the growing ports or great manufacturing towns: by the 1801 census only one, Bath, had more than twenty thousand and by 1821 or even 1831, only Brighton could be added to that class. None the less the resorts are of interest as a comparatively new type of town, and one with importance for their own times and for the future. I should therefore like to look briefly at the foundations for their existence as resorts, the search for health and the search for pleasure, and something of the physical development which resulted.

The original justification for the watering places was the presence in or near them of waters thought to be of a curative nature: the reasons were usually the presence of different and usually foul-tasting minerals, though natural heat or coldness might also be seen to provide benefits to invalids. The use of such waters in England goes back at least to the Romans, while Bath attracted invalids through the Middle Ages, as did various holy wells, the latter offering cures on religious grounds rather than medical ones. The great interest in the medical use of mineral waters, however, seems to have resulted from the sixteenth-century revival of interest in Greek and Roman medical theories on the use of water in the treatment of various diseases.

Continental writers began the investigation of mineral waters, including those of 'the German Spa' (in what is now Belgium) which gave the English resorts their name. The first publication referring to an English well was by Dr William Turner in 1562, who described ten baths in Germany and Italy but only one in England — Bath. He remarks then that few know of that bath though many 'whych beying diseased wyth sor diseases woulde gladlye come to the bath of Baeth: if the knewe that there were anye there, whereby they mighte by holpen, and ye knowe not whether there by anye in the Realme or no'.¹ Matters soon changed in England: the latter part of the sixteenth century and, on a much larger scale, the seventeenth century, saw an active search for such springs, often by those who had experienced them on the continent. By 1740 a book by Dr Thomas Short could list 225 wells, and his list by no means contains all the springs which at one time or other had been thought to be medically valuable. Only a comparative few became 'spas' in the sense of a resort (the sense in which I

intend to use it) but hopeful doctors and landowners in the eighteenth century happily 'puffed' their local candidate, and many obscure wells were used by the people of the locality.

In the Middle Ages, the waters had been used for bathing, but by the end of the sixteenth century, the continental practice of drinking the water had spread to England. The two methods could be used at the same time: in Bath and Buxton invalids might only drink the warm waters, or do so to prepare for bathing as well. Cold springs at first tended to be used internally, but by the seventeenth century cold bathing was introduced for certain illnesses, and by the opening of the eighteenth century when Sir John Floyer published his *History of Cold Bathing*, the practice had become sufficiently popular to worry some of the supporters of the warm waters of Bath. The fashion for cold bathing easily led to bathing in the most commonly available form of cold mineral water — the sea. Dr Wittie advocated seabathing at Scarborough in the 1660s for gout, and by at least the 1730s seabathing was a recognized attraction to Scarborough, though at first it seems to have been more of another form of exercise than a competitor to the spa well on the shore which had originally attracted the visitors. Seawater drinking was also used as a preparation for bathing or on its own: there are advertisements for seawater brought fresh to London by 1745. Both internal and external use of seawater was extensively popularized by Dr Richard Russell's writings, published in Latin in 1750 and English in 1752. He gave medical encouragement to the growth of seaside resorts at places which only offered the seawater, instead of a spa as at Scarborough (though many, including Weymouth and Brighton, managed to find themselves a spa as well to supplement the attractions of the sea).²

The medical aspect of the resorts is sometimes treated as mainly an excuse for attendance, particularly in the case of women, who might not otherwise be able to convince their fathers or husbands that they need make the visit. This certainly was one aspect; as Defoe suggested in the 1720s, Bath 'is a resort of the sound than the sick'.³ We must not, however, forget the general prevalence of disease at the time. As well as infectious and contagious diseases, such as typhoid or smallpox, there were chronic ailments due to dirt, injuries, childbirth, or poor nutrition. The latter might affect even the propertied classes who travelled to the resorts, Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough visited Scarborough in 1733 for the treatment of scurvy,⁴ and others would have suffered from over- rather than under-nutrition. There could be very few families lacking someone with a legitimate ailment. At the same time, medical treatment was frequently ineffective and often dangerous. Doctors often chose 'heroic' i.e. drastic treatment such as strong purges or worse, extensive bleeding; it is suggested that Charles II died at his doctor's hands from the latter cause.⁵ Drinking and perhaps more bathing in the various mineral waters may have helped some ailments (the Bath waters for rheumatism, for example), but even if they were of little use, they were normally of little danger. The exception would be the spreading of disease through public bathing or drinking of contaminated water: Tobias Smollet, who had tried to practice at Bath, pointed out the dangers in his novel *Humphrey Clinker*,⁶ as did other doctors. If this danger were escaped, however, and if the main benefits from the waters were merely psychosomatic, this made the use of waters, along with the pleasure of seeing new places and new people, and the regular diet and habits usually imposed by their doctors on patients at the spa, of greater advantage than many other treatments of the time.

Certainly the proprietors of wells, the inhabitants of resort towns, the doctors who treated the patients, all felt that the health aspect was of considerable importance, in competition with other wells and resorts. The people of Bath for example, were accused of spreading rumours in the 1730s that several eminent people had died at Scarborough, to which the Scarboroughians replied 'Such lies have been her [Bath's] customary crime: They're not the first she's killed before their time'.⁷ But aside from spreading tales, it also seemed well worthwhile to inhabitants or incoming speculators to invest in improvements to facilities



FIGURE 1.
Bath, Thomas Johnson,
*View of the King's and
Queen's Baths*, 1675,
before the Georgian
improvements.



FIGURE 2.
Bath, Thomas
Rowlandson, *The
Comforts of Bath*, a late
eighteenth-century
impression of the King's
Bath and its users.



FIGURE 3.
Bath, Thomas Sheppard,
The Pump Room, 1829,
showing the façade of
the new pump room of
1788–89.

such as baths, wells, pump houses or pump room, to attract the invalids. True, these facilities also operated as centres for gatherings of healthy as well as sick, the aspect which emerges in most of the illustrations of the Baths and pump rooms of Bath. The Rowlandson illustrations from the late eighteenth century, however, emphasize the needs of the invalids, in opposition to those which show the elegant side of the clientele.

The seaside resorts also developed their own health facilities, indoor baths, and, above all, the bathing machine. This appears on the first view of seabathing in England, at Scarborough in 1736, and becomes a common part of the seaside scene. Most were of the rectangular form, though Weymouth boasted a smaller version. The bathing machine allowed both for undressing and transport to the sea in an age when many bathed naked (see the illustration of Scarborough, Figure 5) and even if not, wanted to avoid the trudge over stones to the sea. A further improvement seems limited to the royal family: George III, who had been greeted by a band playing 'God Save Great George Our King' the first time he bathed at Weymouth, acquired (not necessarily as a result) a bathing barge, illustrated at its moorings in Weymouth harbour, which allowed fresh sea baths in complete privacy (Figure 6). The promenades of the spas now stretched along the seashore, and there appeared the beginnings of that important aspect of the Victorian seaside resort, the pier, developed at Margate and Brighton for the use of steamers, but used almost immediately for exercise and pleasure.⁸

The search for health thus remains important, but was certainly not the only attraction drawing visitors in growing numbers to the resort towns, be they spas or seaside resorts. Except for the very ill, the sick would have to be amused, along with their companions, and many doctors advised various forms of exercise or diversions. The healthy, whether or not acting as companions of the sick, would be particularly interested in facilities for pleasure. The enjoyments might be comparatively simple, such as bowling, or swimming in the sea (before it became part of a cure), or carriage exercise. More attractive, however, were pleasures such as gambling, one of the major features of the watering places in spite of attempts by the government to control it. If the resort grew, speculators could offer other amenities — assembly rooms, theatres — to amuse those there and draw others.

It was this multiple attraction of the resorts, coupled with the legitimate excuse of health in face of the censorious, which allowed them to expand with the growth of English prosperity through trade, improved agriculture and ultimately industrial change, and the growth in the numbers of the propertied groups who could afford to absent themselves from estates or business for some time. The landed classes, nobility and country gentry were accompanied by the so-called urban gentry, those without land but who could live in a leisurely and gentlemanly way on government bonds or other investments. Prosperous merchants and traders, those who benefited from the profits of the West and East Indies, and towards the end of the century the industrialists and middling groups such as shopkeepers, might hope to enjoy the pleasures of the resorts. These groups followed the fashion (medical or social) to the various watering places, with different places having a vogue at different times.

Resorts close to centres of population, especially London, might attract visitors for a comparatively short stay, but their approachability by the equivalent of day trippers usually made such places as Epsom or Sadlers Wells become unfashionable as being too popular. More successful were those within comparatively easy reach for those who could afford both the transport and the stays of four or six weeks or more which were not uncommon, but which were not flooded by the less elegant classes. Patronage by the leaders of fashion could be important, though it is interesting that in the eighteenth century royal visits were of surprisingly little effect. Queen Anne may have helped Bath in visiting in 1702 and 1703, but on the whole the royal family, especially the Hanoverians, were not leaders of the ton. To a



FIGURE 4.
Harrogate, Moses
Griffith, *The Sulphur
Well*, 1773.

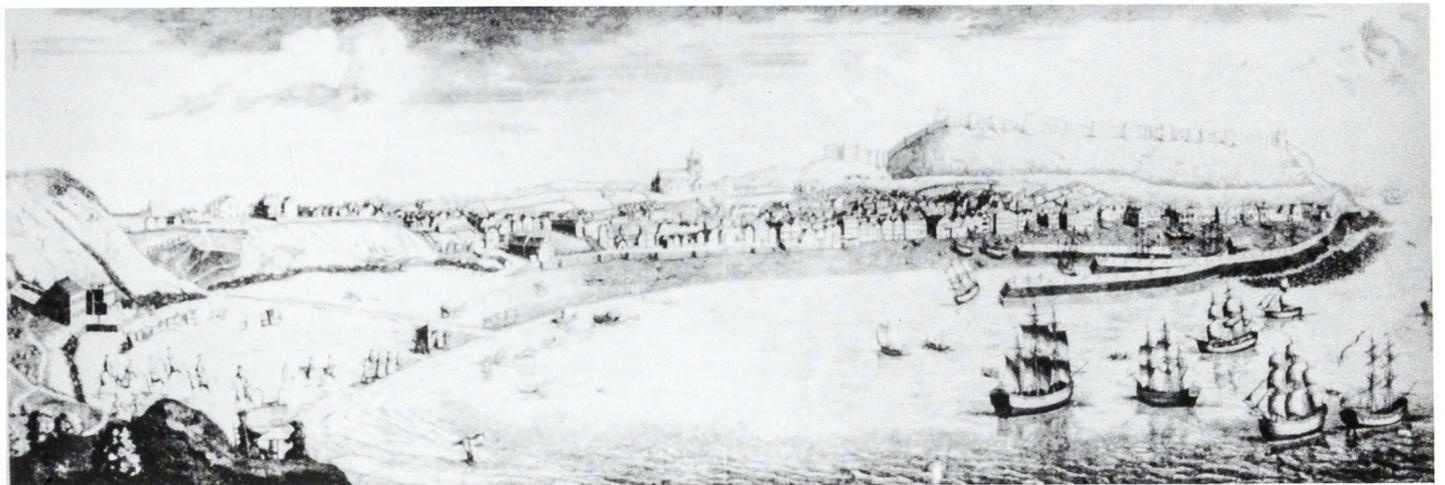


FIGURE 5.
Scarborough,
John Settrington,
Perspective View,
1735, with the spa
on the shore and the
first illustrations of
sea bathing and
bathing machines in
England.

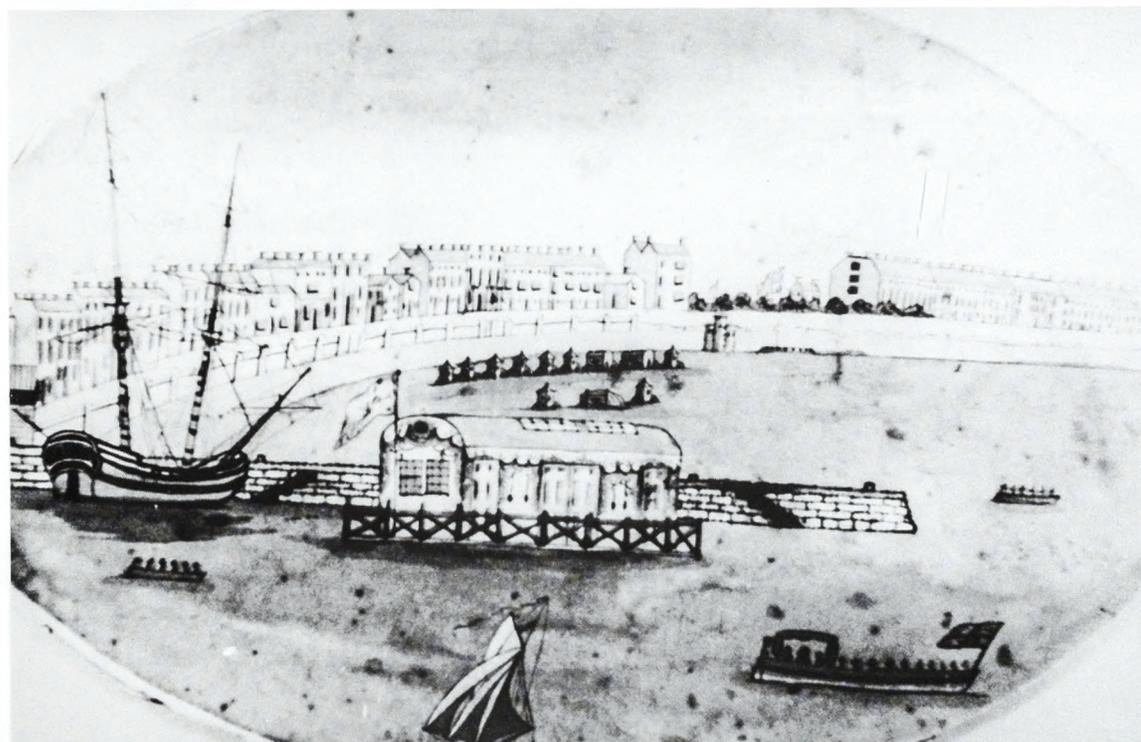


FIGURE 6.
Weymouth,
George III's Bathing
Barge, moored near
the Esplanade
around the turn of
the century.

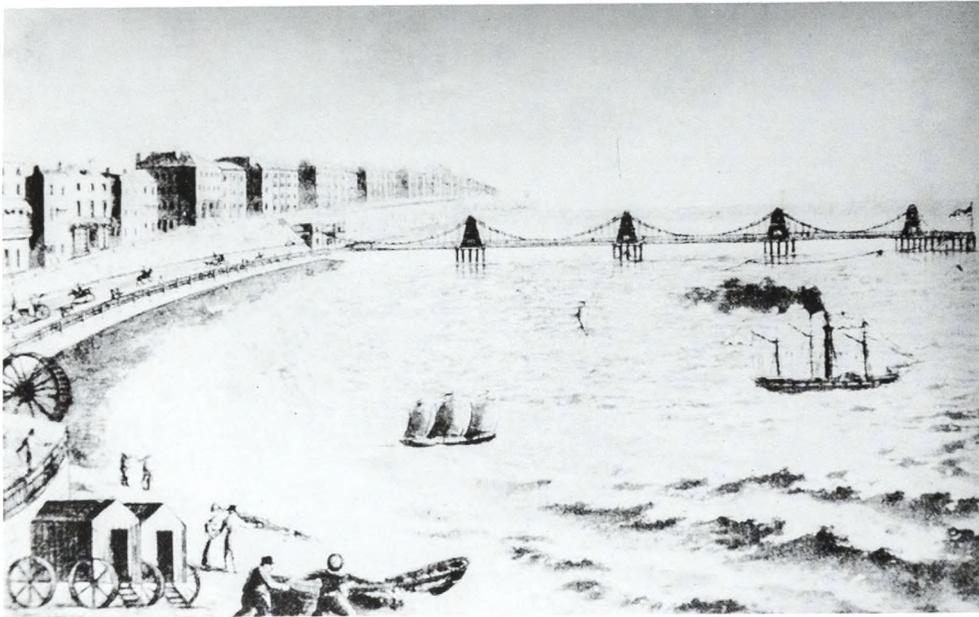


FIGURE 7.
Brighton, The Chain
Pier in 1823.



FIGURE 8.
Weymouth, Statue of
George III, erected
1809-11.



FIGURE 9.
Brighton, Rex Whistler,
*H.R.H. the Prince Regent
Awakening the Spirit of
Brighton*, 1944.

certain extent, they followed: George III to Cheltenham in 1788 and more usefully to the town of Weymouth at various times between 1789 and 1805: his presence did not create the latter resort, but assisted in overcoming some of the limitations of its distance from London, a fact gratefully recognized by the corporation with the erection of a statue (1809–11). His son, ultimately George IV, though more involved with the ultra-fashionable groups, likewise followed a developing trend to visit Brighton, already publicized by Dr Russell and beginning to take advantage of its position as the closest point from London on the south coast: his presence none the less encouraged others to join the trend. These royal visitors, and other members of the royal family, rather followed the aristocratic fashionables, who led the way.

It was the patronage of the 'nobility and gentry of England' which counted, at least so far as the social fashion went. Over the century, they were followed by increasing numbers of the middling groups, to the discontent of some: Smollett, in *Humphrey Clinker* (1771), scolded that 'every upstart of fortune, harnessed in the trappings of the mode, presents himself at Bath'.⁹ In spite of such complaints, all such members of the propertied classes could be regarded, or at least regard themselves, as part of 'the Company', a term which included all the visitors who were able in terms of wealth and to a lesser extent health to participate in the resort's social life.

Most visitors came for comparatively long periods — the sick to be cured, the well to enjoy themselves — for four or six or more weeks. Over this period the members of the company, at least at the larger or more fashionable resorts, would be involved in an elaborate social life, enjoying the facilities for amusement, taking the waters internally or externally, but also displaying themselves to the rest of the group while doing so. This social life was often highly organized, being both formal and public, with the visitors appearing at the pump room, the baths, or the public places and assemblies, in the appropriate dress and at the appropriate time. In 1737 it was said of Bath that 'the course of Things is as mechanical as if it went by Clockwork'.¹⁰

This was true especially in Bath when the notable Beau Nash, was in his glory. In 1705 Nash took over the role of master of ceremonies, a position which seems to have originated in the celebrations of the Stuart courts and been carried to Bath with Queen Anne's visits, and which Nash transformed into the controller of the social life of the resort's visitors. This may have been a necessary part of the development of resort activities, and especially where large numbers of visitors were to be found, a means of controlling the underlying crudity and indeed violence of eighteenth-century manners, and allowing a heterogeneous group including many strangers to mix with some ease, in spite of lack of knowledge of each others' antecedents. The importance of the position to the social life of the nobility and gentry was the subject of satirical comment in 1740 when it was reported

that in the intended Place-Bill next Session, a Clause will be inserted, to render any Member incapable of holding the said Post which, as it is attended with so great an Influence over the Beau Monde, may, in the Hands of a Gentleman of less Honour and Integrity than the present Possessor, be render'd subservient to Ministerial Purposes.¹¹

Nash created this role as governor, and flourished on the gambling common in Bath; he became impoverished with the suppression of certain types of gambling, and had lost his dominance well before his death in 1761.

Other spas and seaside resorts also acquired masters of ceremonies, but Nash's successors at Bath and imitators elsewhere were less dominant and more dependant on the company. The position remained important enough to bring the company literally to blows over the choice in Bath in 1769 (the mayor, it was said, had to read the riot act),¹² and frequently caused fierce squabbles in places such as Cheltenham. As the numbers of visitors grew, however, the



FIGURE 10.
Beau Nash, Master of
Ceremonies at Bath,
1705–61.

company could no longer be regarded as one society; the role of the master of ceremonies declined to introducing young ladies to partners at the dances, as in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, and was ultimately dismissed by Granville in 1841 as 'that most perposterous of all offices'.¹³ Generalizations are difficult, especially as the numbers of resorts and visitors grew, but certainly in the larger spas such as Bath, society tended to break into numerous cliques. This becomes even more true as new types of visitors, especially manufacturers and others of the less elegant middling groups began to arrive. The seaside resorts, which developed later, were on the whole comparatively less formal than the spas, with fewer social obligations such as assemblies and card parties,¹⁴ and truly family holidays, with young children, were emerging by the end of the eighteenth century. Resort visitors still fell into various social rituals, as they do today, but the overwhelmingly formal and public aspects of social life in the early resorts tended to disappear.

This, then, is a sketch of the major reasons why the visitors came to the resorts, spas or seaside places. The result was an expansion both in the numbers of resort towns, and in the numbers involved. As mentioned, the total population increase of the resort towns does not match the great ports or manufacturing cities, but by the 1830s there were two resorts of over twenty thousand: Bath, which had opened the eighteenth century at between two to three thousand and had 50,800 in 1831; and Brighton, which had a population estimated at only three thousand in the middle of the eighteenth century, but which reached a total of 40,634 in 1831, a number which unlike Bath was to continue to grow by leaps and bounds. Others also grew over the eighteenth century, though the supply of potential visitors did not expand to allow them to keep up with the old and new leaders. Perhaps more important and for the present visitor more interesting, is the physical expansion and the amount invested by speculators in housing and amenities: as Smollet said of Bath in 1771, there was a 'rage of building'. Not all such speculations were successful, especially if the speculator mistimed his attempt, but there remained the lure of profit for further speculative investment. Professor Neale estimates that the capital value of the housing of Bath was over £3,000,000, 'which was about the same as that invested in fixed capital in the cotton industry during the 18th century'.¹⁵

Perhaps we can see the extent of the expansion by looking at a map of Bath. Gilmour's map of 1692 shows the town still mainly within its medieval boundaries (Figure 11). By the opening of the nineteenth century, an entire new town had grown up around the old one:

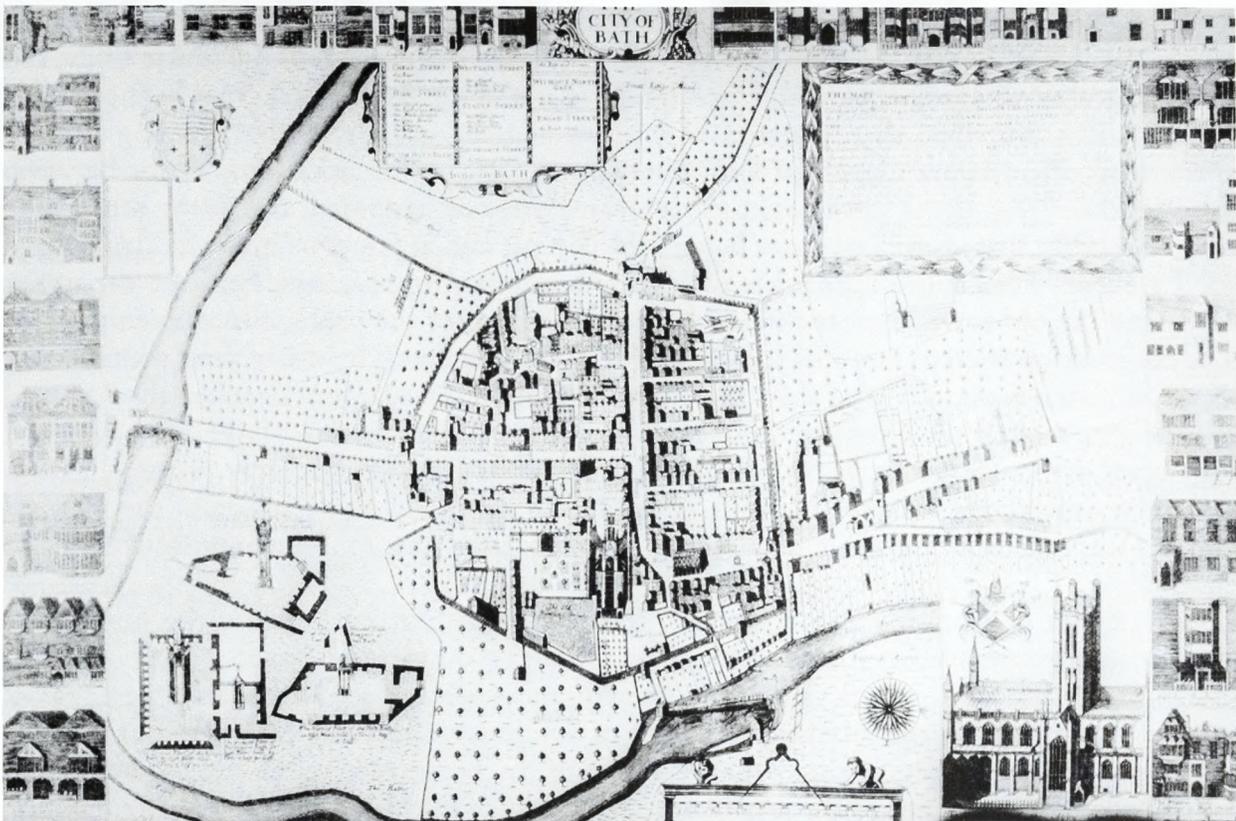


FIGURE 11. Bath, map by Gilmore, 1692; published 1694.

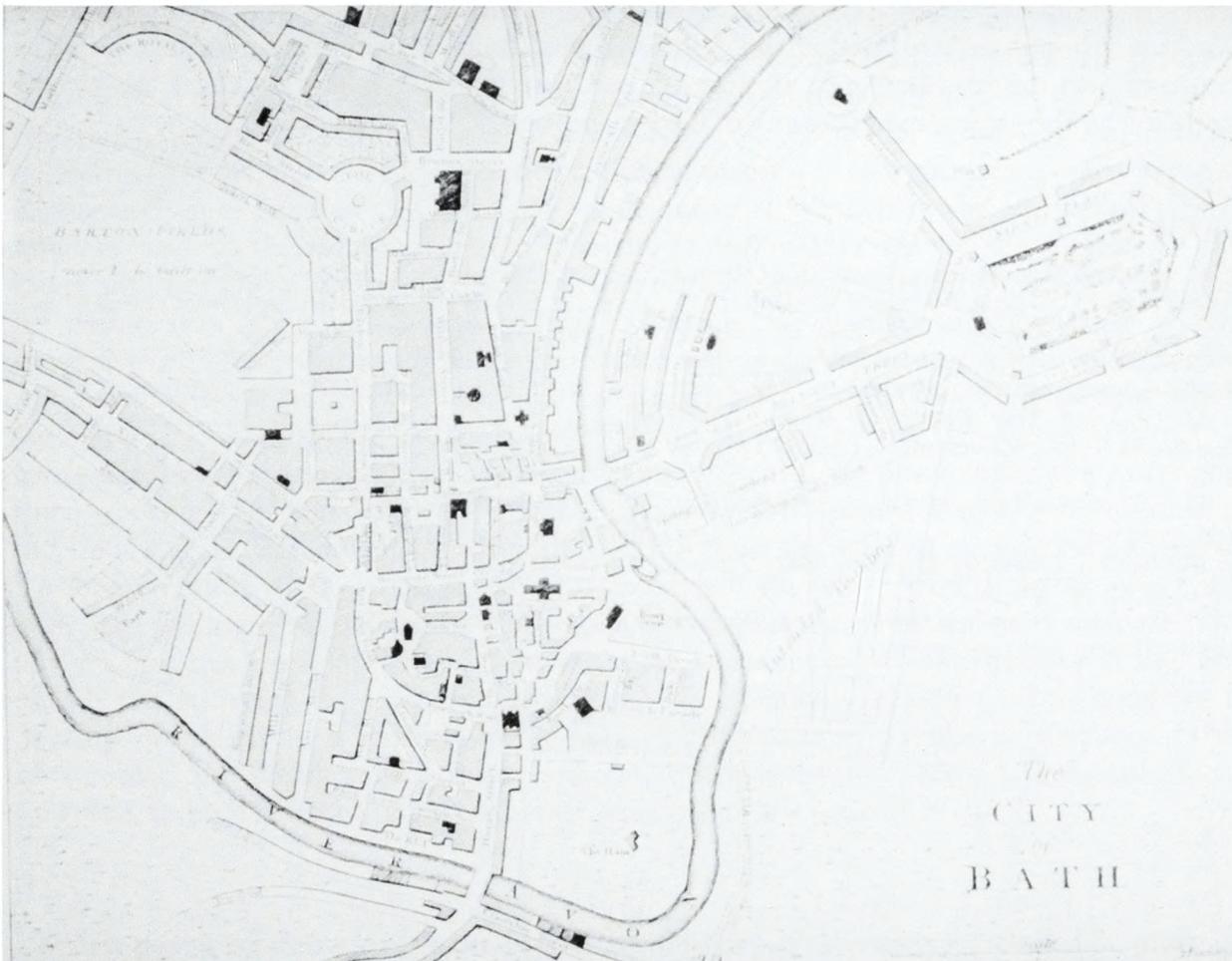


FIGURE 12. Bath, map c. 1800.

more had been planned in the Pulteney estate across the river in Bathwick, but this was halted by the Napoleonic wars. Though it is not clear from this map, much of the centre of the old town was also remodelled to widen and improve the streets and the facilities in the centre. Bath is often described as a 'planned' town, but in fact virtually all the planning was by speculators of individual chunks of land. This is one reason for the lack of connection between the Wood developments to the east, the Milsom Street development down the centre, the new Assembly Rooms tucked away behind the Circus, and St James's Square hidden behind the Crescent. Even more noticeable is the problem of communication between the upper town and the old town. Before the early nineteenth century the problem was even greater. The corporation tried to remodel the old town, at first piecemeal by use of their control over leases and later, especially after the 1789 improvement act, on a large scale when they opened out the area around the Cross and Hot Baths. To correct the junction of old and new town they made Union Street from Stalls Street through Bear Passage, but were prevented from making a neater join with the Milsom Street developments by the obstacle of the Mineral Water Hospital, which dating from 1738, long predated the 1761 beginning of Milsom Street.¹⁶

The effect of planning comes, rather, from the architectural unity of the buildings. Though built by speculators, they were designed to attract the most profitable visitors, so that care with architectural detail, and open streets and squares, all have advantages. The corporation kept some control over the pattern of building on land leased from it, but the rest was carried out according to the owner or lessee of his agents. None the less, the unity of approach has produced one of the most attractive towns of Europe.

Bath was not the only town to show such examples of Georgian architecture, though it probably contains the greatest amount surviving. Other towns too have their streets — Brighton, though much overlaid by Victorian Buildings, Cheltenham, and even Bath's companion in the Middle Ages, Buxton. These are the places where much of the wealth produced by the expanding economy of Georgian England was consumed.

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