

Touch Table digging deeper content

Drinking water for health

Medical science in the 1700s was based on ideas that the Ancient Greek writers such as Hippocrates would have recognised. It revolved around the principle that health was a natural state of the body and that disease or illness was caused by some internal malfunction. In this context, it is easy to understand the premise that drinking water had the ability to cure disease by diluting the problem and flushing it away.

The 'cure' was therefore largely based around drinking and bathing in water. Scientists of the day analysed the chemical content of the waters and self-help guides described how to use the waters to best effect.

Bathing in waters

Physicians in the 1700s believed that body's skin was porous. As such, in addition to drinking it to flush away any malfunction on the inside of the body, the 'cure' also involved bathing in the water to cleanse the same systems from the outside. In Buxton, bathing in water that was naturally heated – via what was thought, at the time, to be some form of underground furnace – became an attraction in its own right.

The Buxton Bather's Handbook, first published by Dr Thomas Page (1832), included the following rules:

1. To bathe about the middle of the day
2. To go into the bath when the body is warm
3. To go into the bath feet first
4. To remain in the water at first, but a very short time
5. To bathe on alternate days or to omit every third day

The baths at Buxton

At the time of Lady Bridgewater's visit (1800), Buxton had a range of baths including separate private and public baths for gentlemen and ladies, a cold bath and a charity bath for the poor. These were all contained within the building now used as today's spa. The Hot Baths complex was developed on the other side of the Crescent later. A later rebuild of this building survives today as the Cavendish Shopping Arcade.

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An active daily regimen

In addition to treating the physical body, physicians recognised that environmental and behavioural factors also played a part in patients' health – what we would refer to as an individual's 'lifestyle' today. Hence the water cure would only be effective if it formed part of a daily regimen of healthy living which included having exercise in the open air, keeping regular hours, relaxing by excursions or engaging in cultural activities and eating and drinking in moderation.

'Promenading', in addition to providing the recommended exercise, was a key part of the social aspect of visiting Buxton as it provided opportunities to engage with others. The Crescent incorporated a promenade in the form of the covered arcade. A popular route would also encompass the Serpentine Walks alongside the River Wye and visitors would take in a view of the new spa buildings from St Anne's Cliffe, opposite the Crescent.

Eating, drinking and sleeping in moderation

Many of the conditions patients presented would, by today's standards, be easily linked to an excessive and unhealthy lifestyle. As part of the regimen, doctors recommended an 8 o'clock breakfast and a late dinner at 2 o'clock. This would have been significantly earlier than the mealtimes that the visitors would have been used to at home but it reflected the prevailing 'early rise and early to bed' ethos which was part of the cure. It also allowed time for bathing and exercising in the morning. Dinner was the main meal of the day with a light tea taken later in the afternoon or early evening.

Finally, having followed the doctors' advice throughout the day, an early night was recommended – although some diary entries suggest that this advice was not always followed. Lady Newdigate refers to attending a "famous ball last night" which included "Singing, and drinking champagne till 4 o'clock in the morning" (1781).

Excursions and outdoor pursuits

Buxton was particularly attractive as a place that, by virtue of its location, offered clean air and the chance to engage in healthy outdoor pursuits. Indeed, these outdoor activities were so successfully taken up, some accounts of the balls in the Assembly Rooms report a disappointing lack of men. They were clearly exhausted by a day's shooting or fishing.

Buxton could not compete with some of the larger spas in terms of its range of facilities, but it could offer the romance of the wild Peak District countryside to stimulate the mind. Attractions included Poole's Hole (today's Poole's Cavern), Lover's Leap (a natural landform and waterfall off the Duke's Drive) and, further afield, Chatsworth and the caves of Castleton.

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A night out at the ball

In addition to the new hotels, and a wide range of baths, visitors to Buxton wanted to be entertained. This was particularly so in the evenings or when inclement weather prevented excursions into the surrounding countryside. The Crescent boasted a newspaper room, a circulating library and a coffee room. There was also an early playhouse theatre in the Spring Gardens.

By far the social centre of the town was the Great Ballroom in the Crescent with the adjoining Card Room (together known as the Assembly Rooms). Balls were held there three evenings a week from 7 o'clock to 11 o'clock, including a dress ball on a Wednesday.

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Letters and diaries

Much of the information about the daily lives of visitors to Buxton can be gleaned from their diary entries. Keeping a diary or writing letters to friends and family were very common ways of passing the time, particularly for women.

The following entry, dated August 7th 1796 by Anna Seward, who was lodging in the Crescent and writing to a Miss Ponsonby, provides us with a snapshot of Buxton:

"... Buxton is growing full, notwithstanding this unnatural weather. I now sit writing by a good fire, in very commodious lodgings. My neat light parlour looks backward, is on the first flight of stairs, and, from its aspect, is quiet and silent. When I close one of the sash windows, that looks on the superb stables, which are built on the rise of the hill, above this splendid, this golden half-moon, the other window shows me only a sloping range of bare fields, without hedge or tree, and intersected by stone walls ... I am gratified by meditating the striking contrast, when, quitting this apartment,

half a minute conveys me into the “busiest hum of men;” amid a crowd of old and young, grave and gay, feeble and frolicksome, blighted and blooming, that sweep, in long trains, through the arcade ...”

Letters of Anna Seward: Written between the years 1794 and 1807, Volume 4, Edinburgh, 1811

Music or the emotions

In an attempt to create a suitable atmosphere for a resort, and a place to convalesce, the Fifth Duke of Devonshire paid for a band of liveried musicians to play in the Crescent forecourt for two hours in the morning and, again, in the evening.

The music is referred to in diary entries which survive. This includes Anne Lister who, during a seven-week stay with her aunt in 1824, felt that the music provoked sad memories to muse on an old love affair.

Paying the bills

A visit to Buxton for the cure wasn't cheap, as this example of an average weekly expenditure from around 1830 testifies. The total bill of £28 10s 4d in modern money would be in the region of £3,500

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