

TIMELESS APPEAL

Enthusiastic racegoers have flocked to Cheltenham from across the UK and further afield ever since Prestbury Park was opened in 1831, but there is another reason that visitors have been attracted to the area for the past two centuries, as LOUISE HOFFMAN discovers



Top The Pittville Pump Room today
Bottom King Edward VII pays a visit to the Pump Room

It was in 1716 that the medicinal spa waters of Cheltenham were first located, in a field south of the town.

Recognising the importance of the discovery, owner of the land Captain Henry Skillicorne deepened the well between 1739 and 1742 and added a pump, canopy and small room for gatherings. But despite this, the spa was not to gain any notoriety outside of the local area for more than four decades.

It seems that celebrity influence was a key part of a successful marketing strategy even then, as, following a visit by King George III, Queen Charlotte and their daughters to 'take the waters' in 1788, visitor numbers grew rapidly during the remainder of the 18th century.

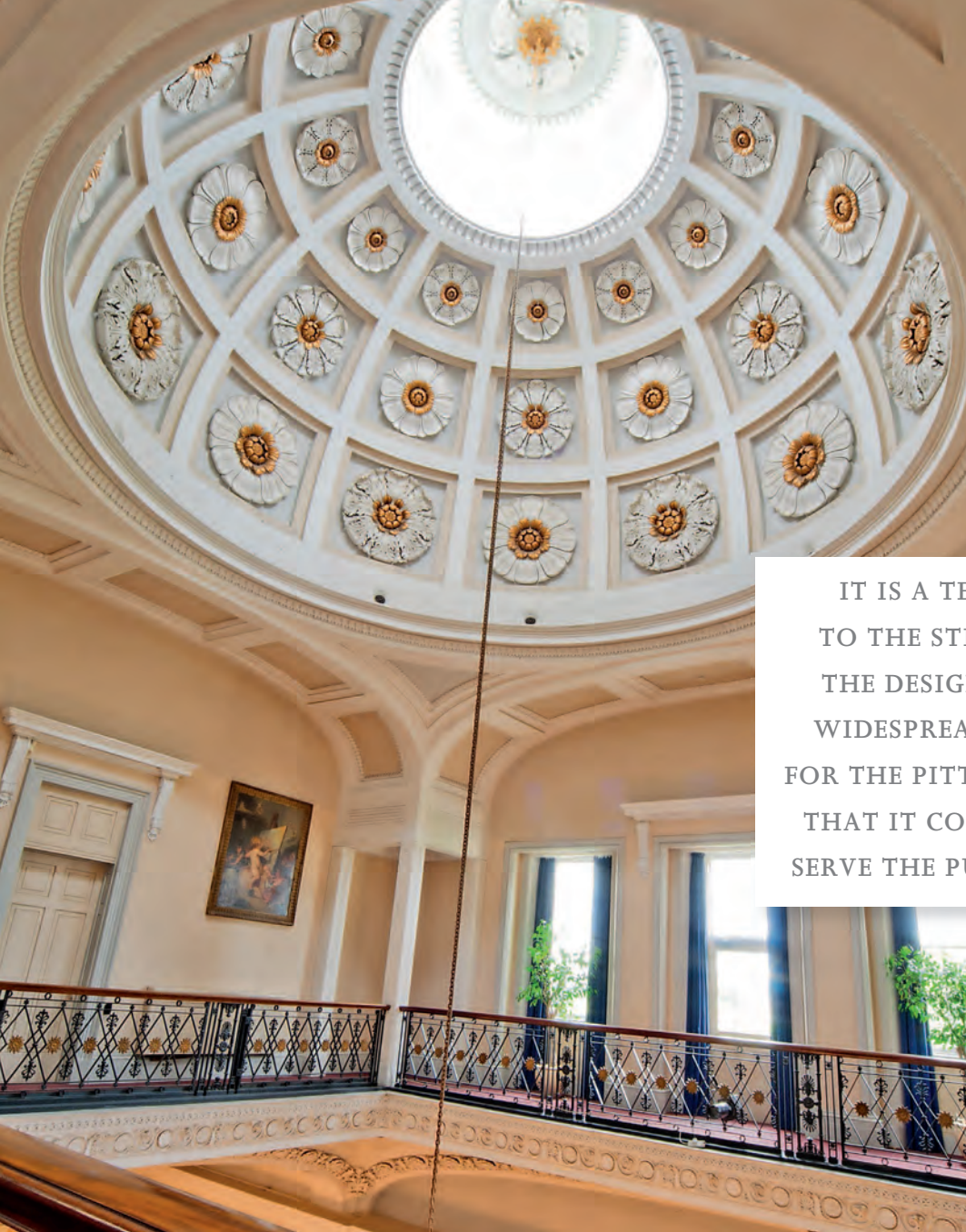
And with this new trend came the entrepreneurs, keen to secure their jug of the spa water. Self-made men such as Joseph Pitt (who is said to have begun his career by "holding gentlemen's horses for a penny", before being taken under the

wing of an attorney and trained as a solicitor) are in fact credited with ensuring the longevity of the spa town by buying up the land surrounding Cheltenham and establishing new wells and buildings during the late 18th and early 19th century.

Joseph acquired a large area of land to the north of the town in 1800, and having monitored the increasing population and number of new spa wells and visitors over the following 20 years, he decided to join the building boom of the time and embark on plans for his own grand design.

In 1824 building work began on his 100-acre estate, to include tree-lined promenades, houses, an ornamental lake and, the *pièce de résistance*, an ornate Pump Room, designed by architect John Forbes.

When the foundation stone of the Pump Room was laid on 4 May 1825, the *Cheltenham Journal* reported that



Left The Pittville Pump Room dome
Right The main hall

IT IS A TESTAMENT
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FOR THE PITTVILLE ESTATE
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MODERN-DAY IMAGES: JON STANLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

“the morning was ushered in by the ringing of bells, the firing of cannon and other rejoicing... [with] crowds of persons from all the neighbouring villages [continuing] to pour into the town from an early hour”. During the day, Masonic processions took place, banquets were held and fireworks lit up the sky with colour above the new estate of ‘Pittville’.

But Joseph’s dream development was not to come to fruition quite as smoothly as he had hoped. Having raised several loans to support the later stages of the construction of the Pump Room, a national banking crisis ensued in December 1825, causing his income to drop. Furthermore, disagreements between John Forbes and another worker at the site led to the former tendering his resignation as architect in 1828. As a result, building work slowed for several years.

Determination paid off, however, and between 1826 and 1830, when the building was completed, the *Journal* kept

Cheltenham inhabitants abreast of all the developments, from the completion of the roof to the “classic designs” of the interior. It also reported that “numerous groups” had been seen “frequenting the pleasure grounds of Pittville” each day, thanks to an initial policy of free admission and the availability of medicinal spa waters to taste.

The Pittville Pump Room was officially opened on 20 July 1830, with visitors flocking to Cheltenham to behold the majestic architecture, sprawling grounds and curative waters. During the following years, the venue hosted the daily activities of spa water sampling and walks and rides through the park during the ‘season’ (May to September), with musical accompaniment provided by a band, as well as many special events and attractions, such as royal birthday celebrations, public breakfasts, balls, concerts, fireworks and fetes. On one occasion, a tightrope

walker navigated his way across the lake – 40 feet above!

Having fallen from favour with visitors over the years that followed – a disappointing result that contributed to the £150,000 of debt Joseph Pitt had accumulated by the time he died in 1842 – the Pittville Pump Room was passed to Cheltenham Borough Council in 1890. But it is a testament to the strength of the design and the widespread support for the estate that it continues to serve the public today – in a somewhat modernised, but very similar way to the early 19th century model.

These days the Pump Room hosts comedy nights, live music, festivals, collectors’ fairs and even roller discos, as well as being available for private hire for weddings and parties.

And, standing firm among this list of flamboyant events, are the landscaped parkland and the medicinal spa water – both still available for general consumption. 🐾

INTERESTED IN FINDING OUT MORE?

Cheltenham Borough Council:

cheltenham.gov.uk

Cheltenham Town Hall & Pittville

Pump Room: cheltenhamtownhall.org.uk

Friends of Pittville: friendsofpittville.org

Visit Cheltenham: visitcheltenham.com