



# THE ROYAL CRESCENT

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BATH



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A Royal Crescent Hotel Celebration

The History of The Royal Crescent Hotel and its Historic Suites

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Since its completion in 1775 the Royal Crescent has been enthralling its distinguished visitors - 'a building more magnificent than any I had seen' in the words of composer Joseph Haydn. This landmark terrace of 30 houses, its literal centrepiece our hotel at Nos. 15 and 16, stands as one of stately England's most familiar signatures.

The one and original 'Crescent' is the outstanding architectural achievement of eighteenth-century Bath, a once-neglected Roman spa whose dramatic renaissance dates from the visit of the gout-ridden Queen Anne in 1703. Hot on those royal (and sore) heels came the leisured classes of England, and Europe too, at first the infirm to bathe in, and drink down, the supposed health-giving mineral waters of the famous thermal baths. Bath's elegance and allure soon drew a more diverse clientele who, in distinguished man of letters Horace Walpole's memorable phrase, 'went there well, and returned cured'. A pleasure resort, in short, where everything went, and everyone too, among them the great, the good and the usual ragtag of charmers and chancers, to gamble at the hazard tables, to dance cotillions at the Assembly Rooms and to promenade along the Royal Crescent.

Bath duly gained further renown as a marriage mart, especially during the October to June 'season', when it was said to be to eligible spouses what Billingsgate was to fish. By the nineteenth century, its brightest days behind it, the city had evolved into a genteel retirement home which the novelist and Royal Crescent resident Edward Bulwer-Lytton compared (while we're on fish) to 'those tranquil ponds in which carps, forgotten by the angler, live to a tremendous age.'

These pages tell of Bath, of its grandest address, and of those memorable individuals who frequented the city and the Royal Crescent. They detail the artists, actors, authors, architects, astronomers and others, often resident within these very walls, whose accomplishments, ordeals and intrigues are commemorated in the names of the hotel's 18 suites. It is hoped that these glimpses of that historic heyday, with its illustrious, colourful and often entangled cast, will enhance the memories of your own stay at this special address.



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On 12th May 1767 a foundation stone was laid among fields fringing the north western edge of Bath. The stone marked the spot where a 'Pile of Building', as one bemused correspondent put it, was to rise above the rapidly expanding town. The inelegant phrase was forgivable; never before had a crescent-shaped terrace of attached houses been proposed. The architect, whose name was John Wood, intended that the new development would complement the nearby Circus which his father - John Wood Sr, commonly the Elder - had begun in 1754. The son's vision was of a majestic classical façade arranged in a sweeping curve and to absolute exterior uniformity; John Wood the Younger would contract individual developers to build to the exact specifications - down to such particulars as white woodwork - that he demanded. The builders would be free, however, to create interiors and rears much as they or their clients saw fit: 'Queen Anne in front, Mary Anne behind,' as the contemporary quip put it.

The Royal Crescent rapidly established itself as Bath's most desirable address. Seasonal residents, invariably rich and even royal, fell for the uninterrupted views over the River Avon and the proximity of the newly opened Upper Assembly Rooms, the most fashionable of

Bath's concert, dancing and gambling venues. Elizabeth Montagu, the original 'bluestocking', wrote in 1779 of her mortification that she had had to settle for a house in the Colosseum-shaped Circus before she finally managed to secure one in the Crescent, in her opinion 'the pleasantest situation, as well as the most beautiful in its form of anything I ever beheld'.

The Crescent's allure confirmed the shift in Bath's social gravity to the upper town. Visitors left the smuts and smells of the old town for the Crescent and the 'fields' below it to promenade after Sunday church and to 'breathe the fresh air of better company,' as Jane Austen wrote in *Northanger Abbey*. Invitations to the parties held in these grand townhouses were fiercely coveted. There were cultured 'bluestocking' soirées - erudite discussions over developments in politics and art, medicine, astronomy and agriculture - but there were also bibulous gambling sessions where fortunes were recklessly squandered and honours impugned, and adversaries were challenged to dawn assignations on nearby Claverton Down, sometimes with fatal consequences.

The suite names at The Royal Crescent Hotel & Spa commemorate that colourful history.

### BEAU NASH

Richard ‘Beau’ Nash was a career dilettante, who had failed as barrister and army officer, when he stumbled upon his metier in the course of a visit to Bath in 1705. The city, in the foremost flush of fashionability, might have been made for this hardened gambler and salon habitué who soon established himself as fixer par excellence in Bath’s blossoming social scene. Nash had a knack for navigating that perilous Georgian course between scandalous and stuffy; a fine feel for where the flexibility lay in the rituals and hierarchies which the leisured classes held dear - how and with whom they might fraternise without attracting censorious comment – quickly commended him as the city’s undisputed master of ceremonies.

Every visitor, even royal ones, deferred to the self-styled ‘King of Bath’. Nash saw to it that balls, dances and social gatherings ran smoothly, supervised introductions, facilitated the making of mutually advantageous matches, introduced new gambling games, and drew up the regulations that governed daily etiquette in a resort busy defining its distinctive character; swords were not to be worn in the Assembly Rooms for fear of frightening the ladies, nor were gentlemen of breeding expected to wear the night time caps and gowns on their morning visits to the Baths. The playwright Oliver Goldsmith wrote of Nash as having arrived ‘at such a pitch of authority, that I really believe Alexander was not greater at Persepolis’.

Nash was a consummate showman, who favoured foppish outfits long on braid, lace and ruffles; beneath the high style, however, lurked a victim of the very temptations Nash himself did so much to popularise, keeping a string of mistresses and losing fortunes at the gaming tables. On his death in 1761 the debt-ridden beau, his Persepolis period a dim and distant memory, was buried in a pauper’s grave. Nobody takes greater credit, however, for Bath’s Georgian heyday; without the glamour Nash brought to the city, it is unlikely that the Royal Crescent would have ever been built.

### DUKE OF YORK

Among the most famous residents of these very rooms was Prince Frederick, Duke of York, favourite son of King George III. Frederick visited Bath in 1795, when he attended the opening of the baths’ new Pump Room and received the Freedom of the City. The city, and no doubt the bestowal of that rare honour, so pleased the Duke and Duchess that they returned the following year to buy the Crescent’s so-called ‘centre house’, apparently for £5,000, an enormous sum at the time.

The extravagant Frederick not only lavished fortunes on property but was also a profligate gambler whom Bath might have ruined, as it did so many others; in fact the city, where he stayed at length, appears

to have had a moderating effect. Hannah More, distinguished writer and philanthropist, wrote approvingly of the royal arrivals as ‘almost inhabitants, and very sober and proper their behaviour’.

While Frederick’s two closest brothers were both destined to reign, as George IV and William IV, the Duke of York’s only lasting memorial was to be as the sorry subject of a nursery rhyme:

*The Grand Old Duke of York,  
He had ten thousand men,  
He marched them up to the top of the hill,  
And he marched them down again.*

Nursery rhymes are elusive as to their historical origins; the expert consensus on this one, that said, is that the ten thousand men were the troops the Duke of York in 1793 led into Flanders against the armies of revolutionary France. The hill in that proverbially flat region has never been definitively identified (the modest rise at Cassel has been mooted) though it more likely serves as a metaphor for

a humiliatingly pointless campaign which ended in defeat and the Duke’s recall from his only field command.

At the desk, however, Frederick was to make a far better fist of things. Commander-in-chief of the army, he is credited with many of the administrative and logistical reforms, among them the founding of Sandhurst Military College, which would ultimately bring Britain triumph in the Napoleonic Wars.

### SIR PERCY BLAKENEY

It’s easy to forget that they were dancing minuets and gambling away fortunes at the faro tables in Bath’s Assembly Rooms just as the guillotine was slaughtering the nobility in revolutionary France. The Terror of the 1790s was wholesale, but in the best-selling early-twentieth century plays and novels of Hungarian emigrée Baroness Emma Orczy, salvation is at hand. Cue the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel and his associates - ‘one to command and nineteen to obey’ - who spring doomed French aristocrats from the clutches of Robespierre’s bloody revolutionaries, and leave drawings of the distinctive red flower as calling card.

French aristocrats were a common sight in Georgian Bath; some visited during the Revolution in search of Pimpernels, or at least the assistance of the British establishment. One, a close confidante of Marie Antoinette, was La Princesse de Lamballe who visited Bath in 1791. She returned to Paris the following year only to be hacked to pieces by the mob in the September Massacres.

But back to our prototype Clark Kent, one Sir Percy Blakeney whose effective disguise is as a dim-witted dandy of the sort in which eighteenth-century Bath abounded. Several of the Pimpernel novels feature the city and make mention of the Blakeney's home there. A later book by Orczy's son actually installs Sir Percy at No 15 Royal Crescent, now part of our hotel. It's good to know our guests sleep in the shadow of no less a protective force than the Pimpernel.

### ELIZABETH LINLEY

In the Royal Crescent's earliest years, on the evening of 18th March 1772, a young woman slipped out of the door of No 11 and boarded the sedan chair which awaited her there. So began one of the most celebrated romantic escapades of the age. Elizabeth Linley was a renowned beauty and soprano who had been enchanting Bath audiences since she was nine. But Elizabeth, now eighteen, had tired

of the effects of her own magnetism. She had attracted so many unwanted marriage suits, one of which had even inspired a successful Haymarket play, that she resolved to leave it all behind by holing up in a French convent.

Bath was thrown by Elizabeth's disappearance, with the artist Thomas Gainsborough especially irked that it interrupted the portrait he was about to complete of the Linley sisters (this beautiful painting now hangs in the Dulwich Picture Gallery). Elizabeth's companion on the journey was the would-be playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, a family friend - but one who would be more than that, as he ardently declared the moment the fugitive pair reached Calais. This proved a suit so much more to Elizabeth's liking that the escape became an elopement. With no further thoughts for the convent the couple returned to England, to the ire of their respective families and the envy of spurned suitors, but determined in their love for each other.

'You are sensible when I left Bath,' Elizabeth wrote Sheridan, 'I had not an idea of you but as a friend. It was not your person that gained my affection. No, it was that delicacy, that tender compassion, that interest which you seemed to take in my welfare, that were the motives which induced me to love you'. They were married, with the blessing of Elizabeth's parents, in 1773. Wedlock only appears to have enhanced Elizabeth's legendary allure; King George III, who

attended a performance Elizabeth gave at Drury Lane that spring, was reported as ogling her 'as much as he dares to do in so holy a place as an oratorio'.

### JANE AUSTEN

Many great writers, among them Charles Dickens, Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding, frequented Bath and wrote of it in their novels. But none is so closely associated with the city, for all the author's own ambivalence towards Bath, as Jane Austen.

Jane was in her twenties when she first visited Bath. She returned in 1801 when her parson father decided to remove the family here on his retirement. Bath did not agree with Jane, who is said to have fainted on first hearing of the move. She disliked the city's fraught social demands and superficialities which she was to inflict upon Catherine Morland, heroine of her first novel *Northanger Abbey*, who undergoes 'all the difficulties and dangers of a six-week residence in Bath'.

In this troubled period Jane appears to have written little except to complete *Northanger Abbey*, a novel that would not be published until after her death. What glimpses we have from surviving letters chronicle the social gatherings she endured and also reflect the

solace she derived from long walks beyond the city's outskirts, and in the fields below the Royal Crescent. After the death of her father in 1805 - his tomb stone survives a walk away in the grounds of St Swithin's, Walcot, the same church where he had married Jane's mother in 1764 - the family wasted little time before moving on.

Once the Austens were settled in Chawton, the beloved Hampshire village where she was to live for the rest of her life, Jane set about her fiction with renewed will. Although 'pictures of domestic life in country villages' were to prove her main subject, she would constantly return to Bath in her novels, and set much of her last novel *Persuasion* there, even if she herself was not to revisit the city in what remained of her tragically short life.

From 1816 the formerly robust Jane began to weaken from symptoms she described as rheumatic but which continue to confound experts. She died the following year at the age of 41

### JOHN WOOD

John Wood is the name of two prominent Bathonians, father and son, whose shared legacy is the astonishingly influential architecture of the city's eighteenth-century revival.

John Wood the Elder (1704-54) drew his inspiration not solely from classical Palladianism but was also influenced by a pre-Roman Britannic paganism; a walk round the nearby Circus, completed in 1768 after John Wood the Elder's death but to his design by John Wood the Younger (1728-82), reveals an exquisitely detailed frieze carved with often druidic and Masonic signs and symbols. The stone circles at Stonehenge and Stanton Drew were as much the inspiration for the Circus as the Roman Colosseum.

John Wood the Younger, who did not share his father's fascination with sun temples, pursued a plainer neo-classicism; among his achievements were the Hot Bath and the Assembly Rooms, but his masterpiece is the Royal Crescent which he completed in 1775.

It is striking to realise that the Crescent and Circus are the work of one family (and even that Brock Street, which connects them, was named after the Woods' son- and brother-in-law respectively, Thomas Brock). Circuses and crescents abound in the urban landscapes of Britain and beyond; but Bath is where their original templates, the achievements of two men called John Wood, are to be found.

### RALPH ALLEN

Anne Elliot, heroine of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, did not much care for the 'white glare' of Bath's distinctive stone. Ralph Allen did, and it made him a fortune.

Allen was not twenty when in 1712 he became the postmaster at Bath on £25 a year. It was a modest salary but, as this astute young man wrote to his grandparents, it represented 'a better route than that affording here in Bath by the gaming rooms presided over by Beau Nash'. In 1720 Allen took over the postal system for the whole of southwest England and in the course of reforming procedures for the delivery of letters, he became extremely wealthy.

In 1726 Allen expanded his interests when he began buying up the local stone quarries at Combe Down. Masons know Bath stone, formed from calcified shell fragments, as 'freestone' since it can be cut in any direction. Before the eighteenth century, however, the local stone had largely been used as an undressed rubble. But with Bath entering a period of frenzied neo-classical development, the savvy Allen recognised that this was to undervalue a stone perfectly suited for clean-cut ashlar facades, and which would also allow the exquisitely detailed carving seen, for example, on the frieze around the Circus. Despite resistance from the competition - Portland Stone interests likened the Bath product to 'Cheshire Cheese,

liable to breed maggots that would soon devour it' - Allen was soon proved right. He built a railway to link his quarries with Bath and with the transport barges on the River Avon. He provided his stone gratis in the construction of landmark public buildings like Bath's Mineral Water Hospital. He then built himself Prior Park, a Palladian mansion in full view of the city and its legions of visitors, justifying the expense on the grounds that it was not merely a home but also a lasting advertisement for Bath's lovely stone. It stands to this day in exquisite grounds on the city's southern slopes.

Ralph Allen never put a foot wrong. By the time he died, three years before work began on the Royal Crescent, Bath had expanded out of all recognition, and almost exclusively in the local stone.

### RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN

Richard Sheridan was a young man when his father, who like the fictional Professor Henry Higgins meant to establish an elocution school, moved the family to Bath in 1770. Richard had greater ambitions, however, and when a family friend, the celebrated singer and beauty Elizabeth Linley confided in him her plans to retire to a French convent, the chivalrous Richard offered to facilitate her clandestine flight from the Linley's new family home at No 11 Royal Crescent. On their arrival in France, however, Richard declared

his own love for the beautiful singer, who encouraged him, and the couple returned home to the disapproval of their parents and the ire of the suitors Richard had so publically bested.

One of these, Captain Thomas Matthews, went so far as to publish a notice in the *Bath Chronicle* which condemned Sheridan as 'a \*\*\*\* and a \*\*\*\*\*'. Sheridan did not need to count the asterisks; being called a liar and a scoundrel amounted to a grievous insult for which he demanded satisfaction. Two duels ensued in the summer of 1772; the second resulted in grave injury to Sheridan. Elizabeth, who was not informed of the wounding until her lover was out of danger, wrote to Sheridan with characteristic spirit: 'Believe me, had you died, I should certainly have dressed myself as a man and challenged M. He should have killed me or I would have revenged you and myself.'

The couple married in 1773 and settled in London. There, Sheridan managed the Drury Lane Theatre, with his father-in-law Thomas Linley as musical director, and wrote his classic comedies of manners. *The Rivals* (1775) in which Mrs Malaprop confuses alligators and allegories, geography and geometry, pinnacles and pineapples, echoes the elocutionary ambitions of Sheridan's own father while *The School for Scandal* (1777), set in Bath, skewers the foibles, vanities and indiscretions that Sheridan had witnessed first-hand during his years there.







### ELIZABETH MONTAGU

If *The School for Scandal* evokes all the folly and frivolousness of Georgian Bath, then Elizabeth Montagu is the play's natural counterpoint, a reminder of the regard for knowledge and scholarship enjoyed throughout the so-called Enlightenment. This long-term resident of No 16 Royal Crescent, who once declared that her Bath home could not 'be understood by any comparison with anything in any town whatsoever', was less complimentary of her more banal neighbours, complaining that their one and only utterance was 'What's trumps?'

Intelligent conversation was what Elizabeth craved. Through the enormous wealth that her marriage to a coal baron brought, Elizabeth soon established herself as the leading London salon hostess around whom the brightest talents of the age – Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, Joshua Reynolds, Hannah More and Fanny Burney – often gathered. At London and in this very house, her Bath base from 1779, she hosted parties where such usual distractions as card playing and strong drink were forbidden. The Blue Stocking Society, so-called because it celebrated scholarship over fashion by ignoring the de rigueur trend for black silk stockings in favour of workaday blue worsted ones, emerged as an active forum for intellectually curious women, though not to the exclusion of like-minded men.

The bluestockings inevitably attracted enemies, with the irreverent satirist Thomas Rowlandson depicting their gatherings, quite without justification, as descending into orgiastic riots. But the so-called Queen of the Blues remained steadfast in her life-long advocacy that education, not merely outward accomplishment, was the inalienable right of every woman. The chief obstacle, as she wisely identified it, was that men 'know fools make the best slaves'.

### LORD NELSON

Horatio Nelson first visited Bath as a convalescent post-captain in 1780 after falling ill when his squadron attempted the capture of a castle on Nicaragua's aptly named Mosquito Coast. 'I am physicked three times a day,' he wrote, 'drink the waters three times, and bathe every other night.' His left arm, 'as if half dead from the shoulder to the fingers' ends', was paralysed.

The arm duly recovered, only for Nelson to lose the other one at Tenerife in July 1797, to go with the eye he had already lost at Bastia. Earlier in 1797, on the occasion of Nelson's victory at Cape St Vincent, his father wrote that the 'names and services of Nelson have sounded throughout the City of Bath, from the common ballad singer to the public theatre'. On his return to England the national

hero, now a Rear Admiral, dragged his 'mutilated carcass' to Bath where his arm stump was successfully treated at the Mineral Water Hospital.

Nelson liked Bath, describing it as 'like Jamaica to any other part of England', but his attachment was also personal. The city was home not only to his retired father but also his youngest sister Anne who, despite the mild weather, died here from a winter chill occasioned 'by coming out of the ball-room immediately after dancing'; she is buried in a table-shaped tomb at St Swithun's Church, Bathford.

Nelson's death at Trafalgar in 1805 ensured he never saw Bath again, though plenty of his comrades in arms would. The city's close association with the Navy, which transferred many of its Admiralty functions here during World War II, was such that no less than three Trafalgar captains are buried in or around Bath. One of them, Admiral Sir William Hargood, was a resident at the Royal Crescent until his death in 1839.

### SARAH SIDDONS

The actress Sarah Siddons was yet to make her name when she joined the theatre at Bath in 1778. She took on the role of Mrs Candour

in *The School for Scandal*, a work by a playwright Bath knew well, Richard Sheridan. The *Bath Chronicle* was impressed, acclaiming Mrs Siddons 'as the most capital actress that has performed here these many years'.

It was in tragedy, however, that Sarah would truly find her dramatic calling; over four triumphant seasons in Bath she took on some 100 roles, most notably great Shakespearian tragic characters including Lady Macbeth, Desdemona in *Othello*, and Ophelia in *Hamlet*.

Sarah also appeared at Bristol's Theatre Royal, shuttling between the neighbouring cities by coach; the reliability and speed with which Sarah regularly made the journey to accommodate an unforgivingly tight schedule is said to have so impressed the fledgling postal service that it began using coaches rather than individual riders to carry the mail bags.

Sarah rode the attendant exhaustion to wow her audiences, among them Richard Sheridan's father, who soon persuaded the acclaimed actress to decamp to his son's Drury Lane Theatre in London. Sarah was loath to leave Bath, as she explained in her farewell address there in May 1782. To the audience, who regarded Sarah's departure as the greatest tragedy she had ever inflicted upon them, she described Bath as 'a point where every gentle breeze wafted my bark to



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happiness and ease'. But London was calling and like many of the other greats of the age, among them the playwright Sheridan, the artist Gainsborough and the astronomer Herschel, it was time to steer that bark towards the capital's yet brighter lights.

### THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH

It was for the work, not for play, that the Suffolk painter Thomas Gainsborough in 1759 moved to Bath, a place where the ambient vanity levels alone were enough to keep the commissions rolling in.

Hordes of portrait painters, some 160 in all, established themselves in Bath during the eighteenth century. None was more successful than Gainsborough, who saw his price for a full-length portrait soar from five to 100 guineas during his time here. He pulled in some of the most prestigious jobs, among them the 1772 portrait of the celebrated Linley sisters which he was on the point of completing for an exhibition at the Royal Academy when Elizabeth 'walk'd off sure enough with young Sheridan'.

Gainsborough, who sometimes completed two portraits in a week, duly abandoned his premises in the old town and moved up in the world by taking a house in the Circus in 1767, the same year work

began on the nearby Royal Crescent. Gainsborough established a showroom on the first floor of his Circus home which often buzzed with visitors on whom the artist was in the habit of eavesdropping unseen from his adjacent 'painting room'. Gainsborough made many Bath friends, among them the Sheridans and Linleys, but he often resented wealthy clients who, he unceremoniously explained, 'only have one part worth looking at, and that is their purse'. It especially infuriated Gainsborough that such people were willing to pay liberally for portraits but wanted nothing to do with the 'landskips' he especially loved to paint but which stacked up unsold in the Circus house, as they would do throughout his life.

In 1774 Gainsborough left for London where he went on to paint several personalities associated with Bath, among them Sarah Siddons and, on several occasions, Elizabeth Linley. He also painted Richard Brinsley Sheridan, a lifelong friend, who was among Gainsborough's pall bearers on his death in 1788.



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### THOMAS ROWLANDSON

Anybody who approaches the Royal Crescent from the centre of Bath may notice the uphill slope, though in truth it's not half as steep as the great Georgian caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson represented it in his famous print series *The Comforts of Bath*. It might perhaps have felt that steep in the 1790s, given that there was a lot of gout about, as the gleeful Rowlandson always likes to remind his audience. Take 'Gouty Persons on a Steep Hill', one of the most memorably merciless images in the *Comforts* series, which shows a tumble of corpulent visiting paunches, sticks and sedan chairs beneath what is unmistakably the Royal Crescent. Rowlandson did not spend much time in Bath, if any, but it clearly delighted him that the infirm, immobile and the gouty could have been gulled into visiting a place whose apparently alpine contours were so evidently beyond their diminished powers to negotiate.

Bath's follies and foibles were meat and drink to Rowlandson who set about Bath's every last 'Comfort' with irreverent vigour; in 'Dinner' a 'Gouty Gourmand' all but expires beneath a weight of discarded bottles and platters and elsewhere sits for a portrait painter while his young wife, unseen, makes out with a fine beau. Rowlandson mocked Bath's concerts and denounced its doctors as quacks, ridiculing the Pump Room's water-drinking protocols as a regimen that could cause nothing but misery.

One of Rowlandson's most notable targets was a former resident of the very house in which this hotel now stands. When Frederick, Duke of York, was in 1809 forced to resign as Commander-in-Chief of the army on revelations that his mistress had been selling cut-price promotions, authorised by the Duke, to fund her lavish lifestyle, Rowlandson embarked on a series of merciless cartoons sufficient to fill a collection.

### WILLIAM HERSCHEL

German-born William Herschel had no apparent interest in the stars when this admired musician, who played the cello, oboe, violin and various keyboards, and wrote symphonies and concertos, was appointed organist at Bath's Octagon Chapel in 1766. He soon began appearing at the city's various musical venues, including the Upper Assembly Rooms which opened in 1771 under the directorship of Thomas Linley. Herschel performed there alongside Linley's much admired daughter Elizabeth, and other members of this formidable musical dynasty.

Herschel and Linley were to fall out, apparently over Linley's failure – on two separate occasions – to provide Herschel with a music stand. A further grievance was that Linley refused to allow Elizabeth, a major crowd-puller, to sing at Herschel's benefit concerts. On



Linley's departure for London in 1776, Herschel was appointed in his place at the Assembly Rooms. By this time, however, he was taking rather less interest in music as the connection between harmony and mathematics had since triggered an interest in astronomy. From 1773, in the company of his devoted sister Caroline who had joined him from Germany, Herschel 'began to look at the planets and stars' and kept an astronomical journal. He then began creating his own telescopes.

Herschel initially divided his time, giving music lessons in the winter and star-gazing in the summer, though his deepening fascination with astronomy meant that students found him increasingly distracted. In 1778 he was living at 5 Rivers Street where, 'having no room for my 20 foot telescope I hired a convenient garden for it on the rising ground at the back of the Crescent'. In the spring of 1781 the 'moon-struck musician' was scanning the constellation of Gemini when he noticed what he initially took to be a comet. On further observation it became clear that Herschel had spotted the first planet to be discovered in modern times. The discovery of this planet, which briefly went by the name Herschel before becoming known as Uranus, doubled the known extent of the Solar System and brought Herschel fame. In 1782, on the invitation of King George III, Herschel left Bath to take up the post of the King's Astronomer.

### WILLIAM BECKFORD

William Beckford, a writer of excessive appetite and inordinate wealth, moved to Bath in 1822 trailing the pungent fumes of his hard-won notoriety. This flamboyant aesthete had just sold off Fonthill Abbey; the Gothic pile which he had had built in Wiltshire to entertain himself and illustrious guests like Lord Nelson was so enormous as to threaten even Beckford's plantation fortunes. Bath also knew Beckford for his fantasy novel *Vathek*, and the rumours which soon circulated of occult goings-on at the home the scandalous author made for himself at No 20 Lansdown Crescent, of devil worship, arcane astrology and monstrosities involving dwarves, might have been taken straight from the novel's more lurid pages.

The lordly Beckford was less interested in assuaging such tittle-tattle than in mining his own inexhaustible imagination. In all this he appears to have been inspired by his great-uncle Charles Hamilton, creator of the renowned landscape gardens at Painshill, Surrey, who had retired to No 14 Royal Crescent where the young Beckford had visited him in the 1770s.

Beckford set about creating his own landscaped grounds in the undeveloped gardens and pastures behind his house, adorning them with battlemented gates, grottoes, ruined cottages and arboreta. He also acquired assiduously and extensively, especially antiquarian

books and works of art by Raphael, Titian, Rembrandt and Velazquez, eventually purchasing No 19 Lansdown Crescent to house his burgeoning collection.

In 1825 Beckford began work on his most visible memorial, the hilltop campanile-style tower which bears his name. The tower, an echo of the fictional one the eponymous caliph in *Vathek* raises to learn the secrets of the heavens, also functioned as a replacement for the actual one at Fonthill Abbey – which was to suffer a spectacular collapse that same year. Beckford's Tower is open to visitors, along with the adjacent graveyard where Beckford rests in a characteristically excessive tomb inscribed with a line from *Vathek*: 'Enjoy humbly the most precious gift of heaven to man – hope.'

### WALDEGRAVE

The Waldegraves have been Lords of the Manor at Chewton Mendip, near Bath, since 1553 when the estate was granted to Sir Edward Waldegrave by Queen Mary.

The Waldegraves were prominent figures in the Georgian nobility, not least on account of their entanglement with the aristocratic and high-achieving Walpoles. The three daughters of the 2nd Earl Waldegrave

and the beautiful and illegitimate Maria Walpole - Elizabeth Laura, Charlotte Maria and Anna Horatia - are the subject of Sir Joshua Reynolds 1780 painting 'The Ladies Waldegrave'. There is a copy of the painting, which hangs in the National Gallery of Scotland, on one of the landings at the hotel. The painting was commissioned by the girls' great-uncle Horace Walpole as a tacit notice of the charms and domestic accomplishments of these unmarried maidens; all three would soon find eligible partners, with Elizabeth going on to serve as lady-in-waiting to Charlotte, eldest daughter of George III.

It is not known whether the family were regular visitors to Bath; but Anna Horatia was certainly here in 1773 when she sat for Thomas Gainsborough. Gainsborough seems to have been pleased with his work; so much so that it was the occasion for his famous falling out with the Royal Academy. The academy upset Gainsborough, one of its founder members, when the hanging committee consigned the portrait to a lowly position where it was constantly obscured by crowding audiences. For years Gainsborough turned his back on the Royal Academy.

The family still lives at Chewton Mendip where the 13th Earl Waldegrave is the estate's current incumbent.



### AMABEL WELLESLEY-COLLEY

When John Wood the Younger drew up the strict covenant that the woodwork on his Royal Crescent houses must be painted white in perpetuity, he cannot have imagined that his will would be defied two centuries later by a septuagenarian spinster directly descended from the Iron Duke.

Amabel Wellesley-Colley's neighbours and Bath's various preservation bodies were scandalised when, in 1972, the owner of No 22 Royal Crescent painted her front door yellow and hung correspondingly yellow blinds either side of it. Amabel, who was in the habit of sunbathing on her balcony in a yellow bikini, turned up in a similarly yellow suit to the public inquiry at Bath's Guildhall.

'I am a descendant of the Duke of Wellington, whose favourite colour was yellow, and I regard it as my duty to uphold the tradition,' declared the defendant whose own drawing room was hung with a portrait of the august Duke. The indomitable Amabel faced down Bath's bureaucrats though the traditionalists continued to complain. An architectural guide published in 1975 sniffed that the use of yellow at No 22 showed how 'idiosyncrasy can spill over into bad manners'.

The yellow door remains to this day, a reminder of one modest episode in the Royal Crescent's long and colourful history.

Written by  
Jeremy Seal



### HISTORY OF THE HOTEL

Our hotel's evolution dates from 1950, when a distinguished guesthouse was opened at No 16 Royal Crescent. In 1971 No 15 was added, and The Royal Crescent Hotel was born. It was not until 1978, however, that the hotel's original interiors were restored to their former glory under the vigorous ownership of hotelier John Tham, who stripped out every last partition, false ceiling and other unwelcome modernisation. In subsequent years several adjacent rear gardens were acquired and dramatic improvements made to the adjoining coach houses, stables and mews properties as the historic hotel established a unique reputation for luxury and service.

Topland Group is one of the largest privately owned international investment groups and has been the caring custodian of The Royal Crescent Hotel & Spa since 2012. The Group's principal activity is Commercial Real Estate, with a portfolio of 270 properties, including a large portfolio of Hotels. Topland Group's experience in the sector has guided the meticulous restoration of The Royal Crescent Hotel & Spa, resulting in the stunning heritage hotel of today, heralded a British icon reborn.



16 Royal Crescent, Bath BA1 2LS +44 (0)1225 823333  
info@royalcrescent.co.uk royalcrescent.co.uk #RCHBath