

Devon Bath Houses in Context

Peggie Upham

I had not heard of a bath house until I researched the ruined building at Elbury Cove, Churston Ferrars, Brixham as a member of the Recorders of the Buildings Section of the Devonshire Association. The first part of my research, coupled with the recording by Brian and Norma Rolf, can be found in The Devonshire Association Report and Transactions 2000. This article contains an OS map of 1865 showing the building as a bathing house. The map and a picture I had obtained of the building thatched, sparked my interest in the ruin.¹

Later I had a wonderful letter from Lydia, Duchess of Bedford, the third daughter of Lord Churston, describing life at the bathing house between the wars. I quote:

It was the loveliest little dream place where we went for our picnics in the summer... We parked somewhere at the top of the woods by the golf course... there is a little lane, (or was), and there was this small prickly path down through the woods - very narrow... We could only walk in single file and going back up with all our bits and pieces was agony! The room above was where we had our wonderful luncheons and teas. I don't think we parked any yachts there, only dingbies...most of all I remember the wonderful feeling of happiness when one opened the door and went in. My father had a very high class sort of telescope up in the window, and watched boats through this... My sister thinks we had a shower downstairs and possibly a loo.

I can't remember that. We always wanted to be allowed to stay there ... But we weren't! As children we could not get down there quick enough. It was like a little magic place, all white washed walls and plain pretty things. Smelling of the sea and totally unforgettable. ²



The Elbury Cove bathing house (Peggie Upham)

Trying to define a bath house I found a useful description in Michael Symes' *A Glossary of Garden History* :

Bath house. *A structure covering, or beside, a cold bath. Sometimes it would be over a spring, as with the thatched 'Roman' bath house at Painsbill, Surrey (c.1790), and elaborate examples such as those at Packwood House, Warwickshire, or Corsbam Court, Wiltshire, might have changing rooms and even fires in addition to the bath itself. At Rousham, Oxfordshire the bath is alfresco and the bath house is adjacent. A wonderful rococo bath house attributed to Thomas Wright at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire, has an antechamber or changing room with a pebble floor lined with sheep's bones.*

Cold bath. *A bath in the grounds, usually on the site of a spring. The bath in the grotto at Oatlands, Surrey, was 'as clear as crystal and as cold as ice'.* ³

Bath houses and other garden buildings became fashionable in the eighteenth century as a result of the Grand Tour, a necessary part of a young gentleman's education. Every country squire had a grounding in the classics but contrary to general knowledge ladies and families also went on the Grand Tour (this is beautifully depicted by Brian Dolan in *Ladies of the Grand Tour* and *Lord Kildare's Grand Tour* 1766-1769). Returning from the Grand Tour, wealthy young men were inspired to create gardens to bring back memories and associations. Also at this time spas and sea bathing were becoming popular, largely due to George III's visits to Weymouth; although bathing was not for pleasure, rather plunging into cold water was considered good for health - the colder the better!

Various influential treatises were written about the benefits of cold water bathing. Doctor Oliver's *Practical Dissertations on the Bath Water* (1707), recommended dips into cold water, preferably mineral springs, as a remedy for impotency, the vapours and other maladies. Doctor Oliver had been to Poland and seen the peasants take off their clothes and roll in the snow, and he had observed how healthy they were. Leland, Pepys and Celia Fiennes all described their visits to the baths in Bath. Pepys was scathing about practice: 'methinks it cannot be clean to go so many bodies together in the same water'. ⁴ Celia Fiennes, visiting 1695, gave a detailed description of the clothing required (the gentlemen wore breeches and waistcoats and the ladies a type of large nightdress) and of the five baths and the ritual associated with the bathing there. Another treatise, written in 1722 by Sir John Floyer of Lichfield, and entitled *The History of Cold Bathing*, also advocated a quick dip in cold water for 'chilling the nerves, compressing the consistency of our animal juices, invigorating the spirits, digestion, circulation, perspiration and retaining an equal bodily weight...The demersion ought to be sudden and not gradual, to prevent a horror'. ⁵ At about the same time, John King, an apothecary from Bungay, described how he identified the appropriate place

to build a bath by searching for a proper spring and taking with him a portable thermometer, to compare springs and river water and find the coldest. A C20 article in *Cotswold Life* entitled *A Short Sharp Shock the Georgian Way*, described bath houses as a must-have accessory of the Georgians. Having a plunge pool or a bath house showed you were definitely in the swim! They were like swimming pools today. ⁶

Architecturally bath houses differed greatly in size and style. Most were rectangular, but some baths were round and some semi-circular. All had a fire place and a pleasure room in which to recover afterwards or to get courage for the plunge. However, they were in vogue for a comparatively short time, mostly in the second half of the eighteenth century.

I could find no research on bath houses; but my investigations uncovered five bath houses or plunge pools in the South Hams: Elbury Cove, Lady Ashburton's bath at Spitchwick, Sharpham, Greenway, and the Wilderness at Dartmouth. This series of bath houses along the river Dart epitomises the history and variety of bath houses from the Georgian period to the early Victorian era. In 2001 the Folly Fellowship's *Journal I* focused on bath houses throughout the British Isles and the editor, Susan Kellerman was able to include those I had researched in the *Gazetteer*.

The plunge pool at Spitchwick, near Poundsgate on Dartmoor was made by John Dunning, a barrister and Solicitor General from Ashburton, who had bought land 1769 and built a manor house at Spitchwick. He married Elizabeth Baring of Exeter in 1780 and was created Lord Ashburton in 1782. Although the pool bears a date of 1774 on the step, it was - and still is - known as Lady Ashburton's bath. This plunge pool and the marble bath at Ston Easton, which is called Lady Hippisley's bath, are the only two pools I know named after a lady.



The plunge pool at Spitchwick, Poundsgate (Peggie Upham)

Continuing down the river, the next bathing house is at Sharpham House, Ashprington, near Totnes. The Sharpham estate was purchased by Captain Philoman Pownoll in 1765. He had received £64,963 as his share in the capture of a Spanish treasure ship and he used this fortune to employ a London architect, Sir Robert Taylor, to improve the Tudor house there for him. It was rare then for a London architect to work in Devon. Sharpham House is sited on a promontory above the river Dart and the grounds include an octagonal pleasure house dated c.1720. The little bathing house was added at a later date. Four paintings of the estate were prepared for the architect prior to the rebuilding of the main house; and one of these clearly shows the pleasure house.



Oil painting of Sharpham House and pleasure house, possibly by Sir Robert Taylor, c.1765.

John Swete's *Travels in Georgian Devon*, Volume I (1789-1800) contains a lyrical account of the view of the estate from the river which confirms many of the details in the painting:



The Woods of Sharpham, cloathing the acclivity of an high hill, at first call'd our attention - for they were of noble growth, spreading themselves magnificently over the whole [words missing] and projected (as its base) their feathering branches over [words missing] - our boat and the waters were now envelop't in deep shade - the beam of the

The bath house at Sharpham today (Peggie Upham)

setting sun tipt only the upper skirts of the Wood towards the West, and all beneath the glowing summit of the hill was wrapt in the sober robe of parting day and veil'd in a purple duskiness - having rounded the Woody promontory, seated on an eminence appear'd the House - the lawn gently declin'd to the waters edge, into which it far intruded; compelling the River to make a circuitous course, thereby enabling Us to range more at leisure over its beauties... In a hollow of these woods, close on the margin of the Dart, rose a pleasure building and a bathing house, and on the opposite shore... were hills of brushwood, and... high rude rocks, piled one on another, in various forms, of a grey tint - and chequer'd with ivy which spread itself in large masses over their surface...

When the estate was sold in 1841 the bath house and boat house were described as 'no mean auxilleries'.

On the north bank further down the river is the bath house at Greenway, near Galmpton, a late Georgian house built, as so often, on the site of an earlier dwelling. The first references to the garden date from the seventeenth century, when, by repute, Sir John Gilbert used Spanish prisoners captured from the Armada to make a garden. In the early twentieth century Greenway was a summer retreat for the author, Agatha Christie; and subsequently the house and garden were cared for by her daughter and son-in-law, Rosalind and Anthony Hicks. Greenway is now owned by the National Trust and is undergoing major restoration. The garden slopes steeply down to the river where there is a substantial, two-storey bath house and an attached boat house. Shown on an early map held by the Hicks, the bath house probably dates from the 1770s or 80s; the boat house is later. Filled and emptied by the tide, this is by far the largest pool I have visited. The bath house has a large pleasure room on the first floor and was thatched originally.



The bath (left) and boat house (right) at Greenway today (Peggie Upham)



Interior of the bath house at Greenway (Peggie Upham)

South of Dartmouth there is another bath house at the Wilderness. This little building is tucked into the riverbank, with a wonderful chimney like a small church spire. The bath was fed by water from a reservoir at the top of the garden which was channelled down the steep hill, through the building and out into the Dart. A bill of sale dated 1841 describes the 'delightful pleasure grounds and shrubberies ...extensive and lovely views... [and] the riverside boat and bathing houses'.



The Wilderness, Dartmouth, from the river (Peggie Upham)

Nearer the mouth of the Dart is an even smaller building. Situated in a tiny cove, it is practically hidden from the river. This building was known as the 'Ladies' Bathing House' and dates from 1840. It was used for changing before bathing in the sea; and a path hewn from the rock leads from the cove to a little tidal pool.



The Ladies' Bathing House, river Dart (Peggie Upham)



Path to the bathing pool, river Dart (Peggie Upham)

The last bathing feature to be constructed on the river was a public bath in 1860, towards the mouth of the river, nearer to the castle. Unfortunately this had a short life as it was situated too far out of the town.

Moving away from the Dart, there was a grand bathing house on the Parker estate at Saltram, near Plymouth. I quote from documents dated 1778:

*I propose putting you under Dr Warren's care the moment you arrive and tell you of it before you come, that my Brother may not be alarmed when he hears of it, he says the cold bath and sea Bathing is the only thing for it, you know that is to be had without trouble at Saltram.*⁷

At splendid Castle Hill, Filleigh, north Devon there is the British Spa House where the chalybeate water still gushes from the ground. Bishop Pococke visited Castle Hill in 1764, he thought that the water was good for his gout.



Spa House at Castle Hill

At Glebe House, Cornwood, there is a modest plunge pool, no more than a little stream-fed trough and known as the vicar's bath; and in the 1880s Henry Bingham Mildmay constructed a delightful salt-water tidal swimming pool on the Flete Estate at Mothecombe beach. Crossing the Tamar, there are two bath houses just into Cornwall: one at Antony and one at Mount Edgumbe. Reginald Pole inherited Antony from Sir Coventry Carew in 1772 and took the name Pole Carew and on his return from the Grand Tour, he began improving the estate. The bath house there was built by Thomas Parlby of Dock, Devonport, in about 1788. Water from the river Lynher is channeled into a small disused quarry which has been partially roofed over in the style of a Roman atrium. In a corner of the quarry is a large plug, which can be lowered to adjust the level of the water in the bath. This bath is unique, as far as I know, in that it has two depths. The bottom of the bath on the right is higher for the ladies and the children and on the left lower, therefore deeper, for the gentlemen.

At Mount Edgumbe there is a beautiful oval-shaped Ashburton marble bath in the English Garden House. It is quite small, with seats at each end; and originally the bath had bronze dolphin shaped taps (now to be found elsewhere in the garden). Hot water was a later addition. Richard, Second Earl Mount Edgumbe, had also been on the Grand Tour and his influence can be seen through the garden.



The English Garden House at Mount Edgumbe (Peggie Upham)



The marble bath, Mount Edgumbe (Peggie Upham)



Cold bath at Packwood House (Peggie Upham)

Moving now to place these Devon and Cornish bath houses briefly in a national context, there is a very early example of a cold bath at Packwood House in Warwickshire (1680).

A Thomas Robbins painting (1784) of Painswick House, Gloucestershire, shows a small building beside a plunge pool in the fanciful Rococo pleasure garden. The Landmark Trust have restored the charming, octagonal bath house at Walton, near Stratford-upon-Avon, thought to have been designed by Sanderson Miller. Here the subterranean bath has rough masonry walls and steps down into spring-fed pool; and the pretty pleasure room above is decorated (possibly by Mrs. Delany) with icicles or stalactites and festoons of shells.

At Kedlestone Hall in Derbyshire the Fishing Room was built by Robert Adam beside a lake, created from a canal. A semi-circular bath is fed by a little stream coming from a nearby spring; and on either side are two boat houses with a delightful pleasure room above. It faced north so the ladies could fish from the windows without spoiling their complexion. The bath house at Corsham Court in Wiltshire was designed by Capability Brown. This bath house is connected to an enclosed garden by a passage decorated with small fir cones. In Somerset there are bath houses at Prior Park, Bath and at Ston Easton where there is another beautiful marble bath, which was found under floor boards. This was known as Lady Hippisley's bath.

Bath houses continued to be built during the nineteenth century. The bath house at Penrose in Cornwall, for example, dates from 1830 and is significant as proof that outdoor cold baths were still in use at a time when hot baths were being installed in houses.



The bath house at Penrose (Peggie Upham)



Interior, Penrose, showing the modest fireplace and bath (Peggie Upham)

At Glenthorne, near Lynton, the Reverend Halliday created a new estate during the nineteenth century. He wanted all of the most fashionable features, including a bath house; but his bath was not filled from a spring nor by the tide, rather sea-water was carried up from the beach to fill a hip bath. This is not, therefore, strictly a bath-house:

Its main room was octagonal with a little fireplace and a leaded window which looked over the sea. It was furnished with a rustic table, chair and stool, a cast from the Capitol, and a hip bath. Here, invigorating sea-water baths were taken in warmth and comfort, the essential sea water being hauled up the steep path in buckets by perspiring servants. In a little lower room was, most probably, a water closet and the whole charming little building was capped by a groined roof and tall chimney. It was tucked into the hillside and surrounded by trees, but one day one of the trees fell on top of it and now its existence is remembered only by a rubbish-filled hole in the ground.⁸

The 1805 bath house at Ozleworth Park in Gloucestershire has been reconstructed from a ruin with a tree growing in the middle. This bath is circular and the centre is unroofed. Water is supplied from a spring-fed reservoir. Some original features remain, including a fireplace similar to the one at Antony.



Reconstructed bath house at Ozleworth (Peggie Upham)

About two hundred bath houses are known in England, Wales and Scotland. Now, thanks to the Garden Trusts, more are being discovered as a result of recording gardens. I am grateful to Carolyn Keep and Clare Greener of the Devon Gardens Trust, and Francis Kelly of English Heritage for forwarding details of these to me as they come to light.

References

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