

## Visit to [Bath](#) – 2008

Tuesday September 23

Arriving in Bath, after some beautiful vistas of farmland, we were startled by how built-up the city was, even though the buildings are [sandstone](#) and low rise. Except, directly across from the [station](#) was an enormous building site.

We followed our entirely reliable Google map with only one stop for advice. We were astonished by the beautiful river [park](#) far below the street level, close to where we turned onto the [Pultney Bridge](#). It is one of only two bridges in the world with shops on it – the other is Ponte Vecchio in Florence. The shops blend seamlessly with the shops on [Great Pultney Street](#).

[Edgar Townhouse](#) B&B greeted us in a friendly but confused manner. Our reservation was wrong, and they had sent us an email to ask why we weren't there already - except we were in Winchester and never saw the email. Thankfully they still had room for us. Up two flights of stairs, we entered a small room with a view over the length of the street, continuous Georgian [terrace](#) on both sides of the street.



We set off fairly soon for a walk. Back across the Bridge we admired the unusual [weir](#) on the town side of the [Avon](#) River. It is an elongated, open-ended oval in three beautifully splashy steps. Above the weir are four boats, swans and ducks. Below are canal boats and more ducks. Beside the river, far below the street level is a private [garden](#) which can be easily seen, but entry costs a pound for non-residents. The lawns are manicured and the flower arrangements are showy. As we walked by, many students were lounging in deck chairs or on the grass.

About two blocks from the river, the [Abbey](#) is immediately apparent, rising above all the buildings, facing away from the river. It is a graceful, [gothic](#) building with flying

[buttresses](#). Very little open space around the building gives it a hemmed-in look. To our regret there was Evensong only on Sundays.

In front, to one side are the famous [Pump Room](#) and the [Roman Baths](#). (We later learned that the Abbey was built over what was found to have been the location of part of the Roman baths and a temple.) On one side was Abbey Square, with park benches



on all sides. We sat in the sun and passing cloudy shade to listen to a busker playing guitar. It was pleasant to relax after a day of travel.

Boom! Suddenly we were shaken from our individual reveries. I thought it was a big lorry in an accident or dropping part of a load. Then up in front of the clouds rose a pulsating column of black smoke. It

seemed to come from the direction of a construction site, across from the railway station or from the railway itself. Just as we were all settling down - Boom! And shortly after - Boom! More thick, billowing smoke, black birds wheeling around. The guitar man shut up his music gear, and when I gave him a pound, opined that it might be a bombing. "You never know!" A waiter from the Pump Room came out their side door and could be heard guessing that it was caused by gas cylinders at the building site. Later we learned he was right. We stayed restfully for a while longer.

As we walked towards our hotel, we started to survey menus for dinner in the many restaurants. Really expensive! L12-20 for an entrée was common. As we crossed the Pultney Bridge we began to wonder - there were fewer restaurants here. Most were very expensive boutique restaurants, with the exception of a rather dreary place that paid no attention to us. Finally we were rescued by the prototypical modern English restaurant - a curry house! For a reasonable price we had a Bangladeshi meal of Tandoori chicken, lamb (with spinach), papadoms and basmati rice. It was so delicious, we both would have been willing to eat there every night if necessary.

Wednesday September 24

Our goal this morning was the free City walking [tour](#), meeting just outside the Pump Room. By 10:30 there were 30-40 people there, and the guides roughly divided us. Deirdre and I were lucky to be in Michael's group – a man with a clear voice and good sense of humour. We had already made a pact to stay close to the guide so we could hear every word.

He started with stops at each side of the Abbey, although he talked more about the environs than the Abbey. He recommended the Roman Baths as the best value for money in Bath. (Later on, we agreed, even at £10.50 each) As we moved on further, he explained about [Georgian](#), or Palladian architecture. He brought forth the importance of [John Wood](#) father and son, as architects who designed and built many buildings and streets. He talked very humourously about decades of delays in building the [Guildhall](#) (beside the Abbey) which now houses a goods market and public rooms on the upper floors. He talked at length about the architects, and I have since noticed that Bath has great respect for architects, often citing their names on plaques.



We saw many sites famous because of individuals. [Beau Nash](#) was the Master of Ceremonies in his heyday; he organized social events and officially introduced strangers to each other in the Pump Room and [Assembly Rooms](#) so people could talk to each other and meet prospective spouses. He is commemorated by a plaque on one of his homes, next to the [Theatre Royal](#); he lived a very long life - into his

eighties. The Actor David [Garrick](#) has a pub named for him, with a large bust above, but Michael wasn't sure if he had ever acted in the Theatre.

Of course, Jane Austen is the most famous Bath resident, but not in her own times, so there is little to commemorate her. He did point out for me, after being made aware of our interest, the ["Gravel Walk"](#) from the dénouement of *Persuasion*. He did name John Wood the elder as the architect who built it to conveniently connect town with the

[Royal Crescent](#). This is a very long, half-lozenge (guide's word) row of Palladian townhouses. When built they were rented to families who came to Bath for several months to enjoy the entertainment and find spouses. Personal servants came also, and Bath people were hired to do the cooking, heavy work, etc. The expansive lawn in front



is still a private space for the residents. Privacy is maintained by a fence and a "[ha-ha](#)" (ditch and retaining wall not visible from the houses higher on the hill). Originally the "ha-ha" kept the cattle in their field between Bath town and the Crescent. Now the field is public parkland and trees have grown up and obscured the view.

From here we returned to town through the shopping streets of Bond, George and Union and later walked down Cheap, Trim and Stall streets. Many of the streets are mentioned in *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*.

The tour ended late (benefiting us with more information) but still in good time to attend the summer weekly organ recital in the Abbey. We moved right up the centre aisle to the choir stalls so we could really enjoy the intricate architecture. From our seats the pipe organ was very loud on the big notes and very intimate on the higher small notes. Perhaps more than a hundred people attended the concert.

The [Abbey](#) took 15 years to build - which I think was fast but the guide thought was long. The gothic style ceiling was unusual because the top "ribs" were fanned, like a round lady's fan. At each end of the nave were gigantic stained glass windows. The east window featured many scenes from the life of Christ.

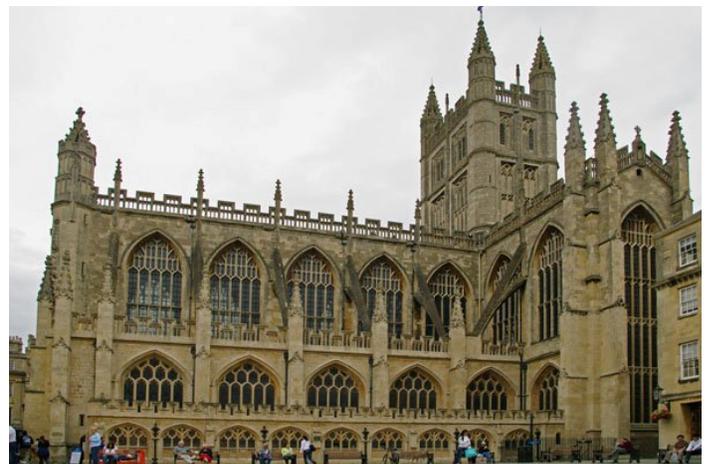
After checking a few places about lunch, I began to look for a telephone booth so I could call home and check about my ticket. What a quest! Everyone uses mobile phones, so there are almost no public phones. We went to the Guildhall market. No public phone, but two vendors got together to decide where was the closest booth. One gave us the somewhat complicated instructions which we followed exactly and came to two phones. One was being used by a young man talking while texting on his

mobile. The other booth had a man and woman squished in, and while they talked, they were also smoking and drinking liquor from a bottle! After waiting what seemed ten minutes, and allowing Deidre to shop in [Boots](#), we decided to walk back to our hotel, as the manager had said there was a public phone down the block. We stopped on Pultney Bridge to buy a couple of sausage rolls and failed to see the phone booth. The manager explained where it was again (plain steel booth down a side road). Deidre went to the room and I went down the road and used my calling card to successfully phone.

After munching sausage rolls and having a quick "cuppa", we set out again, this time to find the bus station. One of the attractions of Bath, the annual [Jane Austen Festival](#), was disappointing - tickets are expensive and the lecture and workshop topics aren't very different from our JASNA events. (That perhaps comes from having quite a few JA experts in Alberta.) However, Thursday night there is a play based on *Northanger Abbey*, and we were advised to take the bus to the (school) theater. So we needed information about the schedule and bus routes. We enjoyed our walk along some of the more commercial streets. At the bus information desk we were told that the last bus to the school was 18:14, not terribly early for a 19:30 play, and that we could walk safely down-hill to town in 15-20 minutes at 22:00.

Satisfied, we wandered back up to the Abbey, opting to take the pamphlet-self-guided tour for a "donation" of £2.50. We spent all of the 45 minutes that the Abbey remained open. The walls are completely filled with memory plaques.

Particularly intriguing was a modern presentation of drawings and textiles. At various points throughout the church were pairs displayed; one drawn design and one textile worked in a way significant to that location.



This evening we thought we should go to a pub. [The Huntsman](#) is old, so in we went. It is also popular, so we went upstairs and found a window seat. Because it was a good

deal we had curry again - [Chicken Tikka Masala](#) (the great British favourite), Lamb [Korma](#), rice, bad [papadoms](#), indifferent [nan](#), and local beer included for L6.95. Enjoyable!

Thursday September 25

This was our expensive pampering day.

However, since we actually woke early (6:30) after breakfast at 8:00, we climbed down the steps by Pultney Bridge and along the river walk (below the weir). At this time of day it was favoured by mothers with young children who entertainingly threw bread for the ducks. Near the train station (but we were well below street level), we watched two couples maneuver their holiday canal boat through a canal lock. Just like I saw in Oxford a few years ago, the women used the winches to open and close the lock gates while one man steered and the other took photos. After one misdirection, we continued our walk almost to the bus station.

By this time, our schedule dictated going to the [Thermae Spa](#), having bought discounted tickets from our hotel (at L20.50 each). We were soon introduced to the routine: plastic smart bracelet for entrance/exit timing (2 hrs plus 15 min for dressing), plus secure locker and credit in café. The changing room is mixed; you walk into a booth with doors on both sides and after changing you step out on the other side, put your clothes in a locker and lock it electronically. Previously we had bought towels for L4.99 in the Guildhall Market to avoid paying L3.0 to rent, but we did take the spa's advice to rent a dressing gown (L4.00). By the end of our stay our gowns were unpleasantly soaking wet.

Lots of options were available. We walked a couple of flights up to the roof-top pool. Supposedly warm, we found it a little lower than bath temperature - not like Banff Hot [Springs](#). Every once in a while the water would bubble in various spots in the pools, pleasantly similar to hot tubs. The view was spectacular, particularly



on the side with the Abbey and a background of green fields. After an hour passed very easily, we left the roof-top to go down to the underground Minerva Pool. Its temperature was even cooler! After a short stay, we ascended to the steam rooms. Finally the temperature was hot! In one large room, there were four circular glass steam rooms, each with different scents. We tried Eucalyptus and Mint and enjoyed both. (I smelled the subtle fragrance on me for another 24 hours). We liked was the roof-top pool the best, so we returned there. Suddenly we had to rush through our 15 minutes of showering, drying and changing time.

A few minutes later we entered the elegant [Pump Room](#) restaurant for our 1:00 reservation. A pianist played a grand piano as we ordered and ate lunch. Deirdre had the great idea of each of us ordering different courses for the set lunch of two courses, and we shared everything as usual: pear and dried ham salad, rabbit and venison sausages with mash and pureed squash, squash and mushroom stew (which wasn't a stew) and steamed cranberry orange pudding. Deirdre drank traditional cranberry and [elder flower](#) spritzer, and I had a local dark bitter.

We turned right from the Pump Room to go to the [Roman Baths](#) next door. A "free" audio guide came with the L10.50 fee. This tour took much longer and was much more informative than we had imagined.



We entered onto a terrace, which was added by the Victorians along with statues of all the Roman conquerors of England standing on the roof in a dispersed fashion. Below was a rectangular pool (green with algae). This Roman pool was part of a large complex of altars, shrines, and a temple. It was called [Sulis Minerva](#): Sulis for the Saxon goddess already worshipped there and Minerva for the similar Roman god. After touring the terrace we entered the museum itself, which was formed as a pathway leading us through variously themed displays and topics.

We had hardly started when Deirdre noticed that a guided tour started by the pool at 4:00, so we hustled through the displays without listening or looking much. This was a good decision because our guide was passionate about the Baths, although he was

from New Zealand. He led us around the pool relating the history of the ancient complex and the probable [Saxon](#) and [Norman](#) times. Then he took us into what are now subterranean rooms but were surface rooms in Roman times: the [tepidarium](#) and [caldarium](#), the massage rooms, the preparation rooms, etc. Although the rooms are in ruins, the guide really stimulated our imaginations to see them alive in Roman times. Finally he took us to the water source – a pool that still bubbles up with in-coming water, and the actual cascading underground stream, warm and steaming, gushing over slightly orange stones.

We retraced our steps through an official shortcut to take us back to the beginning, where we started the audio tour again, reading the historical notes with even more interest. Many artifacts on display were found as part of town building works over the ages. The Abbey foundations constrain how much excavation can be done, curtailing a more extensive understanding of the temple complex. Nevertheless, we spent a total of three hours with the guide and audio guide – until we couldn't take in any more.

Although it was time for an early dinner, we weren't hungry after our lunch – not much surprise! We decided to walk up to the school theatre for the Northanger Abbey play,



since 15 minutes downhill to return means that the walk uphill is not particularly long. As we toiled up the main road of our route, we paused to take a photo of [Camden](#) Crescent and the Paragon Building, Jane Austen sites. Then we continued toiling uphill for another fifteen minutes. By this time we were doubting the validity of the directions. A small hotel

stood on the corner, and I crossed over and asked the receptionist about the theatre. He was horrified that we were trying to walk there because it was another 25 minutes away. He insistently offered to order us a taxi and we concurred. Good thing! The taxi ride was 10-15 minutes, and the school was off the main road. We would never have found it!!

At the school, we were politely greeted by a couple of uniformed school boys who directed us across the courtyard and through a tunnel to the theatre. After a wait, during which many people bought beer or wine (and took it into the theatre), we were allowed in. We found a couple of seats in the third row. The theatre was indeed a gym, but the raked seats were individualized and padded. The stage set was simple and clever. A flat, box-shaped riser defined the centre of the stage. At the back was a backdrop in the form of a multi-paneled room screen; each of the panels swung freely. On one side the panels made one scene, and on the other side another scene - all black on white. As the play went on, at an increasingly fast, farcical pace, the actors used the panels for entrances and exits, as well as the wings (theatrical black curtains). The play was funny and witty, superficially similar to the novel, and populated by four actors who rapidly changed costume elements. Although it started late, it finished on time, and our return taxi was also on time at 10:15.

Friday September 26

At "[Good Buy Books](#)" Wednesday I bought a little book citing all the Jane Austen references to Bath, both fictional and from her life. And, at the [Jane Austen Centre](#) I bought a map showing where the sites were. So our object today was to walk in an

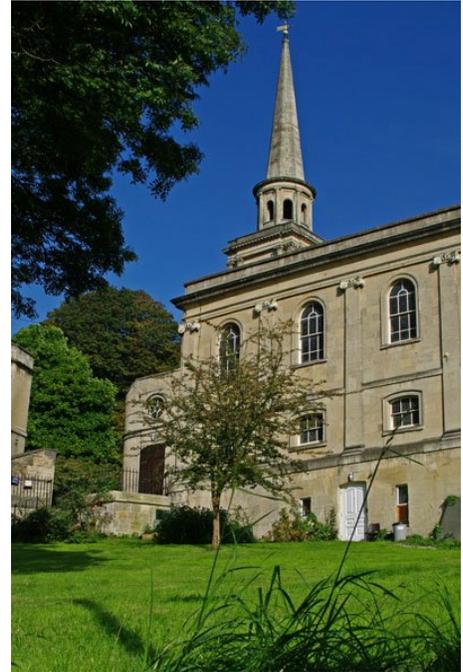


effective route to photograph them all both for ourselves and for the website. (We hope to find the time and energy to build our own walking tour page on the site.) The first site was just down the road and around the corner from our hotel. JA lived with her family at [4 Sydney Place](#) - the only townhouse which was covered with scaffolding on this day! Just a challenge to photograph that's all!

From here we followed our map through [Henrietta Gardens](#) and beyond, in search of the church ([St. Swithin's](#)) where JA's parents were married and father was buried. Up and along we did find it, although it was closed. We went into the south (downhill)

garden to get a good perspective for our photos. As I came up again out of the garden, two women came out of the church and asked if we would like to see inside. Delighted, we entered a spacious, light church. The women told us it had recently been rehabilitated, which accounted for the warm cream paint, light oak pews and chairs, and clean bright stained glass windows.

The women showed us displays on the history of the church, including that it had been just missed by a huge landslip. We recalled that across the street and far down the road was a lovely grass-and-flowers park hanging on the side of the Bath cliff – all of this is the result of a terrible land slip that turned rows of townhouses into rubble.



We accepted their invitation to photograph the “marriage lines” of Jane Austen’s parents and of [William Wilberforce](#) (anti-slave-trade campaigner). They also mentioned [George Austen’s](#) grave/headstone and that of [Fanny Burney](#) were in the church yard.

Another highlight this day was our tour of [No. 1 Royal Crescent](#). This wide, semi-oval row of tony townhouses is anchored at one end with a townhouse restored to the late 1700s. We learned that the whole [Crescent](#) was deteriorating into a derelict state when one man bought No. 1, and by his influence and his restoration efforts, the Crescent has become a wealthy residential area again. In the first room a (probably retired) woman handed us a plasticized sheet of information. On a whim, I said we would rather hear about the room from her, if she didn’t mind. She was so enthusiastic and knowledgeable that we asked the same of each woman overseeing each room. Thus we really came to appreciate how Eighteenth Century people of the upper middle class lived in Bath as visitors. The exhibit included the kitchen, well-stocked with many ingenious devices for cooking in a hearth.

After a couple of quick photos of the grounds, we deviated from our Jane Austen path. On Thursday’s uphill evening walk we noticed the Saracen’s Head pub, looking very old. Deirdre checked it in her book and discovered that it was old when the young

Charles Dickens wrote Pickwick Papers there. We enjoyed the atmosphere while eating “baguettes” (subs) and drinking Guinness (me) and shandy (Deirdre).

The rest of the afternoon we traipsed up and along a lot of streets, finding and taking photos of JA sites. Exhausted we returned to the hotel for tea. To my great astonishment and relief, my Brit Rail pass had arrived in the mail ready to be used for our journey to St. Ives.

For dinner we had planned to go to a pub in the city centre that advertised traditional roast beef dinner “all day” and “every day” (most only do roast on Sundays). Apparently “all day” means “day time”, because it was closed. We wandered quite a bit, but since it was after 7:00, places were either closed or expensive. We turned back to our hotels area to eat at the Curry House again. This time we got two different chicken and lamb dishes, and we received more papadoms with our order, plus relishes. Very good.

