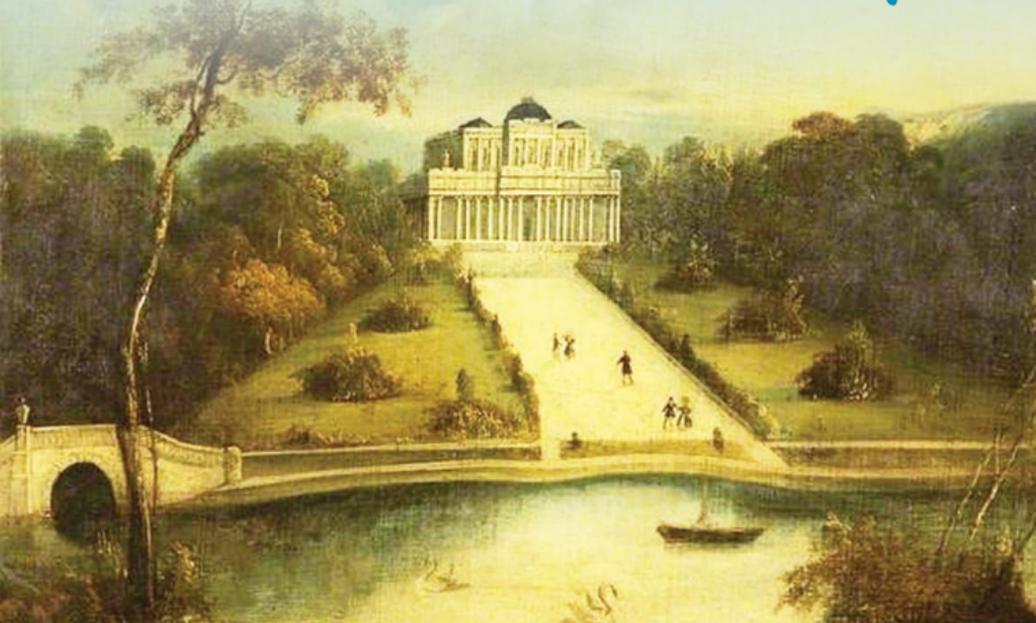


# PITTVILLE PUMP ROOM

## A brief history

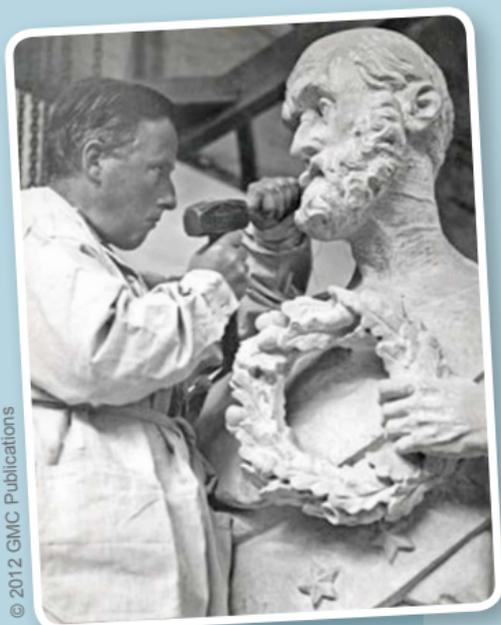


**S**PA TOWNS such as Cheltenham grew up as leisure resorts. They developed around springs whose waters contained minerals that were marketed as therapeutic. Wealthy patrons visited spas to ‘take the waters’ for their supposed benefits in treating disorders such as constipation, rheumatism, gout, skin conditions and worms. Pittville’s water was reputed to be the only natural alkaline water in Britain.

### The building

Pittville Pump Room\* (1825-30) was intended to be Cheltenham’s most spectacular and prestigious spa building and the centrepiece of the ‘new town’ of Pittville. It was the vision of the lawyer, MP and wealthy landowner Joseph Pitt (1759-1842), and designed by Cheltenham architect, John Forbes. The building was listed Grade 1 by English Heritage in 1955, one of only five in Cheltenham.

\* FOOTNOTE The Oxford English Dictionary defines a pump room as “a room or building where a pump is housed or worked; specifically a place at a spa where the medicinal water is dispensed.” The phrase dates from 1731.



*Detail of Patrick Conoley in 1965 working on the statue of Greek physician Hippocrates*

The Pump Room is a square, two-storey ashlar building in the Greek Revival style, based on engravings of the Temple of Ilissus, near Athens. The roof is of slate and has a central copper dome. The east, south, and west sides are faced by Ionic columns. The original main entrance was on the south side, facing the park. The original

statues were sculpted by Lucius Gahagan of Bath, and symbolised the town's status as a health resort: Aesculapius, the god of medicine; Hygieia, the goddess of health; and Hippocrates, the ancient Greek doctor considered to be the founder of Western medicine.

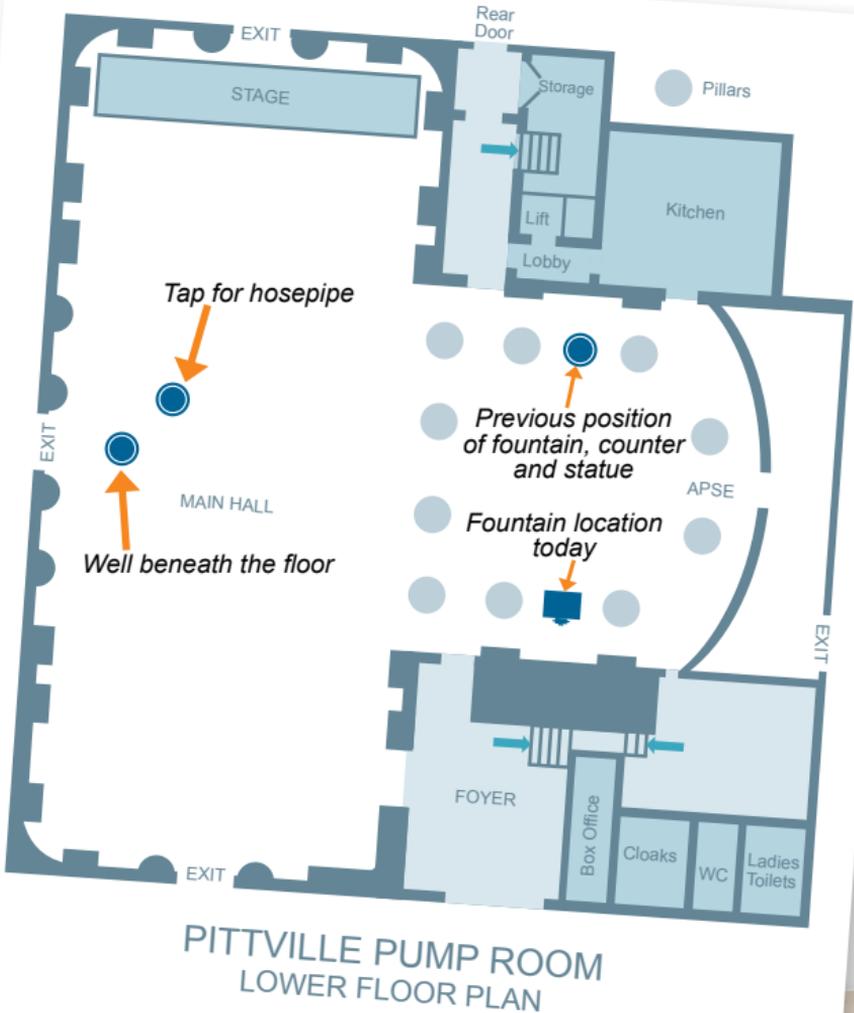
The myth grew up after World War 2 that Aesculapius (on the left, looking at the building) was holding a baseball bat put there by American troops. In fact, the statues had been removed between 1937 and 1939 and only replaced in the mid-1960s. The later sculptor, Patrick Conoley,

reused the original wooden staff. This has since been replaced on at least two occasions, each time the staff becoming more like a baseball bat.



## The well and drinking fountain

There have been several wells feeding the drinking fountain. Today the mineral water comes from a well eighty feet under the floor of the main hall. In 2003 this began to leak but, with generous support from local company Kohler Mira, the problem was resolved by 2005.





The water is pumped electrically from the well via filters into a tank above the drinking fountain. An early hand pump is still in the basement but is not currently accessible. The fountain was originally in a more prominent position on the other side of the apse and was set behind a marble bar with a statue on the bar or nearby.

## ‘Taking the waters’

The Pump Room was leased by Pitt to a manager who was expected to turn it into a going concern through the sale of the water, admission fees to the pleasure gardens, and profits from special events. During the ‘season’ (May to September) visitors could drink the mineral water each morning. There was a card room on the lower floor and, upstairs, a library and billiards and reading rooms. Music was



provided by a band, and people would promenade through the gardens. Balls, concerts or firework displays were held to mark special events such as royal birthdays or the first day of the races.



*Dobson, Lupton & Co. Ltd. Photo.*

THE LOUNGE, PITTVILLE SPA PUMP ROOM.

*From "About and around Cheltenham: the guide for visitors", Ed.J.Burrow & Co., 1921*

## Changing times

By the 1880s the Pump Room was no longer financially viable. The Council bought the building and the surrounding gardens in 1890. In the 1920s and 30s the Pump Room was used by badminton, roller skating and tennis clubs. Regular events included fetes, flower shows and the Mayor's annual garden party. In the 1930s a programme of repairs was begun which was interrupted by war; the Pump Room was commandeered for the US Army as a storage depôt from 1942. The lower floor

was a food store and servicemen lived upstairs. Parts of the colonnade were bricked up and some of the columns were damaged. Dry rot spread.

Following the war, there was a public debate about whether the building should be demolished or restored. The Council decided (by just one vote) to restore it. The Gloucestershire Architectural Association provided professional advice and Robert W. Paterson ARIBA acted as architect throughout the building's restoration. Work began in 1950 and in 1960 the building was re-opened by the Duke of Wellington whose ancestor, the hero of the Battle of Waterloo, had visited the Pump Room while under construction.

The restoration included a new entrance foyer, heating, lighting and catering facilities with funding coming from well-wishers, the Ministry of Works, The Pilgrim Trust and the Council. A new floor (since replaced) and the stunning antique chandeliers were donated by a local businessman.



Fritz Fryer  
Lighting  
undertook  
a major  
restoration  
of the  
chandeliers  
in 2010



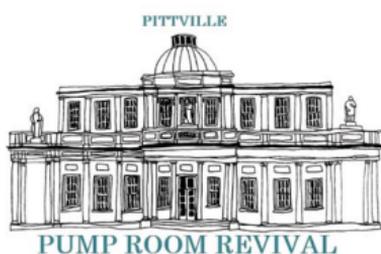
The upper floor was used by the Gloucestershire College of Art for about twenty years after which it housed a costume museum (1983-99). The Pump Room is still owned by Cheltenham Borough Council and has been managed by The Cheltenham Trust since 2014. It is used for a wide variety of events including concerts and weddings and is open to the public at other times.

**Directions:** Pittville Pump Room is 1½ miles north of the town centre in Pittville Park.

**Address:** East Approach Drive, Cheltenham  
GL52 3JE

*For opening hours check*

*<https://www.pittvillepumproom.org.uk/opening-times/>*



Pittville Pump Room Revival is most grateful to Friends of Pittville and individual supporters who contributed to the cost of this leaflet. *Image credits: Fiona Clarke, David Collins, Chris Conoley, Fritz Fryer Lighting, Catherine Martin, Rob Rimell, The Cheltenham Trust*

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A much more detailed history of Pittville Pump Room can be read/downloaded at

*<http://pittvillehistory.org.uk/Pittvilleplaces/BlakePumpRoom.html>*