


PITTVILLE



PUMP ROOM REVIVAL

ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021

Background

1. Pittville Pump Room Revival was originally a sub-committee of Friends of Pittville. It was constituted as an independent association on 13 November 2019 and held its first AGM on 12 October 2020, when Chris Archibald, Fiona Clarke, David Collins, Hilary Simpson and Jo Vallender were elected to the committee.
2. Jo stepped down in January 2021 due to work commitments, but the rest of the committee has continued to meet on a regular basis. Ten committee meetings have been held over the last year, some face-to-face and some via Zoom. Monthly email updates have been sent to our supporters and we have an active social media presence on Facebook and Instagram.
3. In February 2021 the organisation was officially registered with Cheltenham Borough Council as a “Friends of” group and in May 2021 Hilary Simpson was nominated as one of two representatives of the heritage sector on the Council’s newly-formed Culture Board.
4. Our aim continues to be the protection and promotion of Pittville Pump Room – the only Grade I listed building in Cheltenham in public ownership – and its unique heritage. During Heritage Open Days 2021 we hosted a successful event in partnership with Pittville History Works entitled “These Magnificent Rooms – the Season at Pittville Spa.”

“The finest building in Cheltenham”

(Historic England)

5. We are hampered by the fact that the Cheltenham Trust, which manages the building on behalf of the Council, does not to our knowledge engage in any form of consultation or dialogue with stakeholders or the local community in respect of the Pump Room. Our function as a “critical friend” has therefore been carried out, somewhat unsatisfactorily, via social media and communications with Council officers.
6. As a small example of how this has operated in practice, in July 2021 we commented to an officer at Cheltenham Borough Council that the Trust did not appear to have a procedure

for raising complaints or concerns. Within two weeks, a link to such a procedure appeared on the Trust's website.¹ We are unable to prove whether this was a coincidence or the result of our intervention; but a number of similar incidents suggest the latter.

Pump Room Revived? The current situation at Pittville Pump Room

7. At the time of writing (September 2021), a number of significant improvements are visible at the Pump Room compared to the situation two/three years ago, when we produced our first mystery shopping reports. Two of our top priorities from the very start of our campaign were to see proper catering facilities and heritage interpretation for visitors at the Pump Room.
8. As recently as May 2020, we were still being told – at what turned out to be our last meeting (via Zoom) with the Chair and Chief Executive of the Cheltenham Trust – that our proposal for a tea room at the Pump Room was not on their agenda; we were given the impression that the pop-up catering outside the Pump Room was viewed as a temporary summer project which would be phased out again as soon as weddings and private hire could be resumed.
9. However, the outdoor Heritage Café at the Pump Room, which the Trust opened in July 2020 as a response to the pandemic, has been extremely successful and has become a permanent fixture, open seven days a week and hosting a range of musical and related events.²



Image: Pump Room Revival

¹ A screenshot taken on 18 June shows no link; a screenshot of the same page taken on 9 August shows that a link has been added.

² However at the time of writing (September 2021) the Heritage Café is getting a disproportionate number of negative reviews on TripAdvisor, especially from out of town visitors, with complaints about both the quality of the catering and the quality of service. With competition among catering outlets now returning to pre-pandemic levels, we trust that these concerns will be remedied quickly.

10. In addition, the Trust has recently opened an indoor “Deco Café” which is open from 11.00 am to 2.00 pm on days when the Heritage Trail is open, and a temporary Orangery structure has been erected on the west side of the Pump Room. We have welcomed these developments.
11. At our May 2020 meeting with the Trust we also asked whether heritage was part of the recovery plan for the Pump Room. At that point there did not appear to be any specific proposals for this. Heritage interpretation finally arrived at the Pump Room in the form of a Heritage Trail telling the story of the building, which opened on 16 September 2021. Again, we welcome this initiative. However, visitors are still not able to go upstairs or to taste the mineral water (see paragraphs 16-18 below).
12. So far, so revived. There remain a number of areas of concern, however. In the sections that follow, we look at some of the issues we have pursued during the past year.

Public access to the Pump Room

13. The Cheltenham Trust’s agreement with Cheltenham Borough Council includes a requirement to make the Pump Room available to the public “Wednesday to Sunday 10am to 4pm, events permitting.”
14. After the Pump Room re-opened in May 2021 following the lifting of Covid restrictions, it appeared as if the Trust was planning to ignore this clause in the agreement. A series of dates were published covering the period October 2021 – April 2022 when the new Heritage Trail (launched 16-19 September 2021) would be open to the public, but these only amounted to four or five days each month.
15. We raised this with Cheltenham Borough Council. After we had done so, the wording on the Trust’s website was changed. It now appears that additional dates for the Heritage Trail will be added on a week by week basis. It is clear, however, that this is something which will need to be carefully monitored.



16. Access is still limited, however. The first floor of the Pump Room continues to be closed to the public, meaning that they cannot look down from the gallery on the room below, see the dome up close or enjoy the views over the park from the first floor windows. In addition, the mineral water is not available for tasting (see paragraphs 17-18 below).

The non-availability of the mineral water

17. Pittville Pump Room is widely advertised as the only place in Cheltenham where it is still possible to “take the waters”, and this is a crucial aspect of the building’s (and the town’s) heritage. However the mineral water (which is the responsibility of Cheltenham Borough Council) has been permanently unavailable since the Pump Room re-opened in May 2021.



18. Prior to the pandemic, we already had serious concerns about the quality of the water, which had been losing its distinctive taste for some time. Indeed, blind tastings in 2019 revealed that it was indistinguishable from local tap water. A new well may need to be sunk, and/or different filtering arrangements put in place.

The use of upstairs rooms at the Pump Room as offices

19. This issue first arose almost a year ago, when evidence that the Cheltenham Trust’s corporate team had relocated to the Pump Room began to emerge. Our own consultant’s advice was that Historic England should be consulted on even minor changes to the

internal fabric of a Grade I listed building. We accordingly asked the Council's Interim Head of Planning whether planning permission had been sought or obtained for change of use to offices.

20. Meanwhile, an article was published in the *Gloucestershire Echo* on 9 February 2021 under the title "Fears Iconic Cheltenham Building Could Become Office Space". A comment from Cheltenham Borough Council claimed that "buildings of this type need to have allocated office space to support their operational running as visitor destinations" and the Trust itself commented that "Since the café opened last June, a small core team has operated flexibly from the pump room to support the café and core business."
21. As no reply had been received to our enquiry about whether planning permission had been sought, we submitted a Freedom of Information request to the Council. In February 2021 a response was received which stated that "operational deployment of staff is a matter for the Cheltenham Trust and not the Council." A separate response from The Interim Head of Planning commented as follows:

"Use of part of the building as offices for the Trust is likely to be ancillary to their management activity and no permission for a change of use would be required. From what I have established there are no permanent changes to the building, and the limited number of people who have been using the space are involved in the running of the building and the Trust. In terms of the listed status of the building as Grade 1, this is not a material consideration to that issue".

22. We conclude that it is highly likely that the Trust's management team are now permanently based on the first floor of the Pump Room.³ We continue to be concerned that a change of use in this Grade I listed building appears to have taken place without proper consultation, and that this in turn is a factor in the lack of public access to the first floor rooms.



³ Management vacancies have been advertised giving the Pump Room as the location; and it is also clear that no provision has been made for staff offices in the future plans for The Wilson, where the Trust's corporate team was previously based.

Lack of communication and consultation on the operation of the Pump Room

23. We have made repeated attempts to gain access to the Cheltenham Trust's future plans for the Pump Room. No public or community consultation appears to have taken place on these. The Chair of the Trust wrote to us in March 2021:

“As you are aware, we are a Charitable Trust and not a public body and our business plans current and future are therefore not in the public domain.”

24. The Trust does report to the Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committee, whose functions include to “provide constructive ‘critical friend’ challenge to the executive” and to “amplify the voices and concerns of the public”. The most recent update on the Cheltenham Trust was presented to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 5 July 2021; however the report was not available to the public as the contents were deemed commercially sensitive.
25. The Trust's principal channel of communication is social media, where any challenge or criticism is immediately shut down. On 26 April 2021 the Trust posted on Facebook accusing us of publishing “incorrect and misleading comments and posts on social media” and it has subsequently blocked us from commenting on its pages. Meanwhile comments on our own Facebook page from Trust representatives, including the Vice Chair, verge on the abusive.
26. The fact that the recent construction of the Orangery on the west side of the Pump Room apparently took place without any prior consultation or advance notice, simply being announced on social media the day before, is a typical example of the way in which the Trust operates in relation to the local community. Its lack of accountability and its failure to engage with local stakeholders on its plans for Pittville Pump Room – the only Grade I listed building in Cheltenham which is in public ownership – therefore remain matters of concern to us.

David Collins, Hilary Simpson, Fiona Clarke, Chris Archibald

September 2021

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