

The Turkish Bath, Royal Leamington Spa: Health, Pleasure, Curiosity and Culture

In 1863 a Turkish bath or Hammam was built, at great expense, at the Pump Rooms in Royal Leamington Spa. This oriental space offered a hidden sanctuary, built within the camouflage of an older, more traditional building. This new bath not only provided a luxurious experience, but also purported to offer a powerful therapeutic effect on a wide variety of ailments. The Hammam was an arena in which health, pleasure, culture and curiosity could collide; a mystical world far from the restrictive, Victorian society in which it could be found.

1. How did those who promoted the Turkish bath in Britain perceive it as a potential medical and social agent?

The supposed medical benefits of the Turkish bath contributed to its early popularity and those who wished to 'transplant the oriental bath to England were careful to stress its health giving aspects' (Croutier, 1992, p. 94.).

The three major enthusiasts writing on the Turkish bath in this period were David Urquhart, Dr Richard Barter and Charles Bartholomew. These men were amongst the first to fervently endorse the medicinal values of the Turkish bath and they played a significant role in the introduction of the bath into Britain.

Yet while these writers promoted the Turkish bath as a universal panacea, physicians often condemned it as being not only useless but also potentially dangerous. The major problem for this professional

class was that the evidence of the health giving properties of the Turkish bath remained largely anecdotal, incomplete and unsatisfactory. Medical understandings of the Turkish bath were largely speculative, relying on 'superficial and delusive knowledge' (Wakley, February 23, 1861, p. 198.).

The medical profession displayed exasperation at

the lack of systematic investigation of the curative claims by those who used the Bath. Throughout the 1860s the literary voice of the profession, the *Lancet*, recorded the 'lively debate about whether the baths offered any real benefits to health' (Kandela, February 13, 1999, p. 601.). Enthusiastic articles were tempered 'by a rather tetchy Editorial questioning the real benefits to health'. (Kandela, February 13, 1999, p. 601.).

The popularity of the Turkish bath also stemmed from its appeal to a middle-class population, striving to find socially permissible leisure activities within a constraining Victorian value system. The Bath fitted into the refashioned model of leisure which encouraged morality and progress, health and physical fitness, the arts, travel and knowledge (Brethnach, 2004, p. 162.). It navigated the concern that 'leisure should not be too pleasurable, but that it must serve other serious purposes' (Brethnach, 2004, p. 163.), offering a form of 'inoffensive enjoyment' (Urquhart, 1856, p. 6.) and a 'pleasure free from vice and a luxury which was not injurious' (Barter, 1861, p. 8.).

The augmentation of Turkish baths in Britain can also be seen as

part of a wider hygiene movement in which bathing and bathhouses were extensively promoted. Turkish baths were endorsed as part of the response to the 'poor state of health and hygiene of the urban masses' (Kandela, p. 72.). These Baths, like the washhouses before them, represented a reaction to anxieties about widespread disease and illness and a search for preventative remedies. They symbolised a move to rehabilitate the social conditions of the poor and working classes grounded in the faith that washing represented an act of self improvement (Avciogiu, 1998, pp. 60-61).

2. Why were there tensions surrounding the development of a Turkish bath in Leamington Spa?

In September 1861 the Leamington Royal Pump Room Company, chaired by Henry Jephson, made the decision to purchase the Pump Rooms, with the intention of undertaking restoration work aimed at renewing the appeal of the spa. Jephson's renovation scheme included a proposal to build a Turkish bath on this site. However such plans were widely disputed.

The local population believed that the aim of the renovation project should have been the restoration of the Leamington Waters 'to the eminence which they enjoyed when they were a source of substantial prosperity to the inhabitants' (Leamington Spa Courier, March 1, 1862.); a programme to revive the appeal of the healing and health giving properties of the saline waters – 'one of Nature's own remedies for the alleviation and cure of disease' (Anon, 1887, p. 3.). These waters had been the selling point of the spa up until this point, recommended in the treatment of an exhaustive list of conditions. As such, it came as a shock when proposals for the renovated Pump Rooms included the construction of a Turkish bath; a facility which did not conform to the traditional healing method which depended on the saline nature of the spa water.

This shift, from an emphasis on the chemical properties of the water, to the action of water as an agent, posed a threat to the traditional eminence of spa towns as centres for water based cures. Treatments, such as the Turkish bath, were 'freed from the need for the presence of mineral springs; all that was required was a source of clean water' (Bradley and Dupree, 2001, pp. 417-18.). The Leamington Spa Courier was quick to criticise the Turkish bath programme, declaring that:

'The space devoted to the Turkish Bath is wholly beyond any demand ever likely to be made on that department of the institution, while the heavy expenditure required would be far better applied to the development of our staple local resource – the mineral waters'. (Leamington Spa Courier, March 1, 1862).

Concerns were also voiced about the length of time the Company was taking over beginning the renovation programme. Financial difficulties, largely caused decision to construct the Turkish bath, appeared to be halting proceedings. The Courier viewed the decision to install a Turkish bath as an 'impediment to the success of the entire undertaking' (Leamington Spa Courier, June 7, 1862.). The Courier concluded by remarking that in the decision to build the Hammam at the Pump Rooms, the Company had 'placed the foreign appliance

in the ascendant to the detriment of the native element to which the rapid growth and much of the substantial prosperity of Leamington may fairly be ascribed' (Leamington Spa Courier, June 7, 1862.)



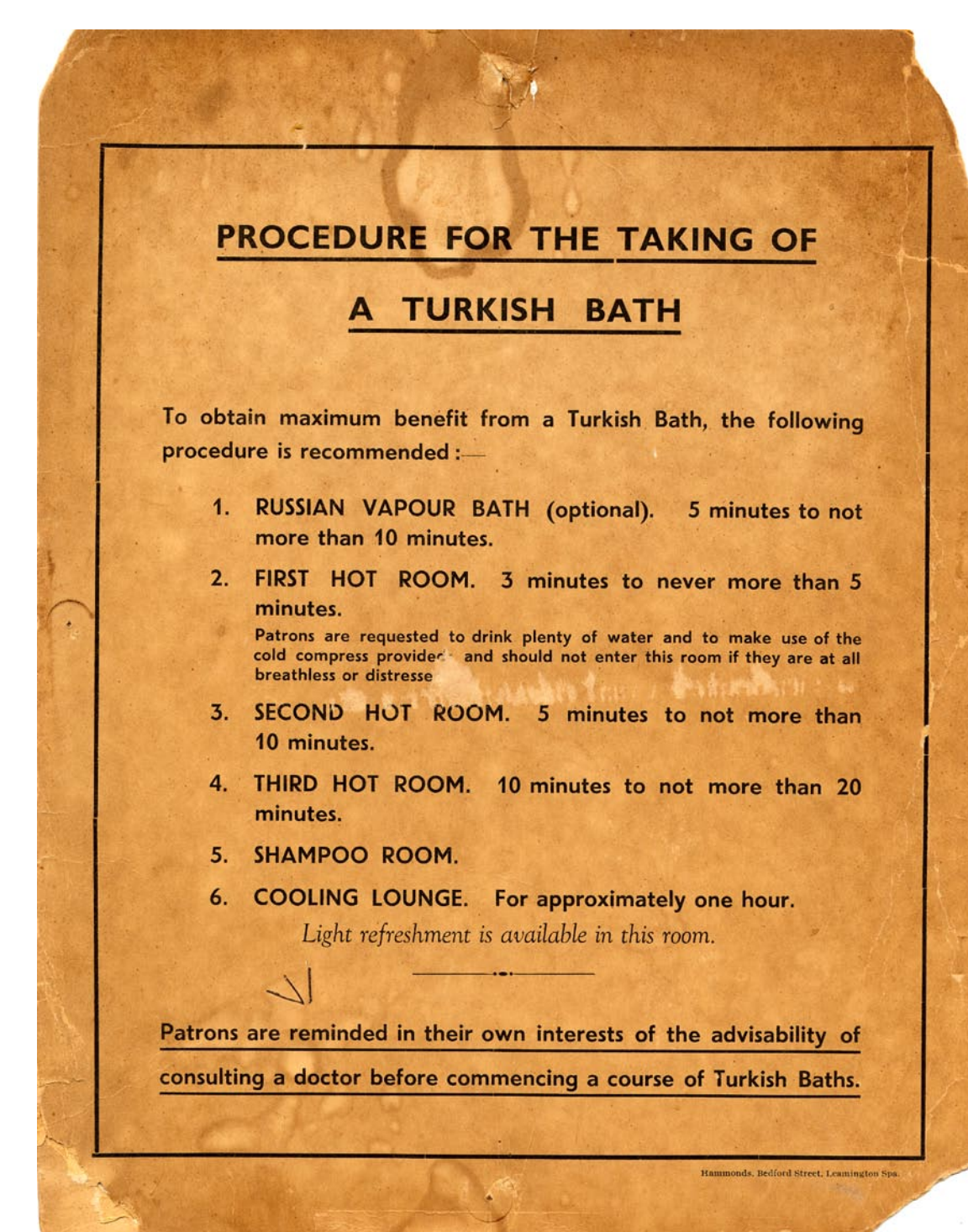
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3. How was the Hammam understood as a cultural space by those who encountered it and how was its architecture shaped by the treatment it provided?

As the Leamington Hammam indicates, Turkish baths tended to be constructed within the shell of an existing building, their characteristic Moorish architecture hidden within the walls of a more traditional structure. The Turkish bath occupied an interior space, separated from the external world by boundaries of culture and cleanliness, etiquette and attire. The architecture of the Turkish bath represents a division between external and internal spaces, the façade adhering to traditional Victorian motifs while the interior embracing an Eastern theme.

Once inside, 'the sombre air' of the Bath would calm the senses, shutting out the external world, allowing the bather to engage with an inner realm of fantasy (Urquhart, 1850, p. 32.). The boundaries between the interior and exterior of the Bath were also enforced by the rituals surrounding the bathing procedure. On entering the Hammam the bather would 'immediately divest himself of his boots or shoes, in order that he may not pollute the apartments that were devoted to the attainment of cleanliness' (Allsop, 1890, p. 14.).

The allure of the east was generated amongst consumers exposed to an increasing number of images and objects from around the globe. It was not merely that the East aroused a sense of curiosity in individuals; in this exotic world, Western man found a paradise lost, a culture not yet contaminated by mechanisation and industry. Consumers sought to experience the 'Other' as a way of regaining parts of themselves which had been lost in the fragmented nature of industrial society; their appropriations represented the articulation of needs and desires left unfulfilled by other aspects of their lives.



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