ART. XV – *The Spa Resorts and Mineral Springs of Cumbria*

By R.H. GAMBLES

MANKIND'S oldest and most enduring faith is his belief in the magic powers of those mysterious waters which flow unbidden and unceasing from the bosom of the earth. The Christian missionaries to Anglo-Saxon Britain found a country dotted with hundreds of "magic" springs and wells, many dedicated to local gods, goddesses and water spirits, the focus of rituals and beliefs inherited from a thousand years of pagan water-cults whose origins had long been forgotten. Four centuries of Roman occupation had reinforced this Celtic tradition and at the time of Britain's conversion to Christianity, the Church, while deploring these heathen practices, acknowledged that it could not ignore, still less eradicate, such ancient and deep-rooted faith in the natural springs or the ceremonies attached to them. And so medieval Christian Britain acquired all those "holy wells", rededicated to Christian Saints, which were to figure so largely in the religious life of the country for the next five hundred years and in its social life for three hundred more. Repeated exhortation and condemnation discouraged the offering of sacrifices and belief in the supernatural powers of these waters. The emphasis moved to their healing powers, both medicinal and spiritual, achieved by bathing in or drinking from the water and through the strength of one's Christian faith and the intercession of the appropriate saint. If there had to be an element of magic still, it was at least magic over which the church had some control.[1]

Many pagan customs survived[2] and some, such as the Springtime dressing of the well-heads with complex patterns of flowers and the throwing of coins into "wishing wells", still flourish, while annual pilgrimages to certain holy wells have today become important symbols of a public expression of the Christian faith. For those who suffer, these offer hope of relief from pain; for those who wish merely to renew their Faith they offer the certainty of spiritual joy: is this so very different from the dreams and expectations of all those other countless generations of humanity who sought comfort from the "magic" waters?

It was almost inevitable that superstition and shades of the supernatural should continue to surround the holy wells. The religious reformers of the Protestant Reformation condemned as Roman Catholic superstition, practices which had once been denounced as pagan.[3] The wells were stripped of all claim to magical or miraculous properties but, as always, it proved easier to decree a change in human beliefs than actually to achieve it. Ecclesiastical magic and religious pilgrimages might have disappeared but, throughout the country, belief in the healing powers of the ancient springs remained strong and nineteenth century students of folklore discovered a lively rural tradition of frequenting local wells to drink the health-giving waters.[4] Indeed, within a dozen years of the establishment of the Elizabethan Protestant Church there appeared the tentative beginnings of a new water cult which was to transform English social customs and to endure for the next three and a half centuries but which was, nevertheless, firmly based in the ancient belief in the special virtues of the mineral springs, some crystal clear, others cloudy with chemical

deposits, some pure and tasteless, others mephitic and nauseous, some issuing hot and steaming from the earth, others ice-cold.

In 1562, Dr William Turner, Dean of Wells, physician and botanist, published his *Booke of the Natures and Properties of the Bathes of England* in which he strongly recommended a much greater use of their waters, commenting with southern condescension that "there are manye in the North and North-West partes of England . . . whyche beynge diseased wyth sore diseases woulde gladlye come to the baths of Baeth if they knewe that there were anye there."[5] Nine years later England's first "spa" began its life – in the north, at Harrogate – to set a fashion which by the early seventeenth century had captured much of the upper class and, after the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, swept the country.

The enthusiasm of the English gentry for "taking the waters" prompted Horace Walpole to observe that "One would think the English were ducks; they are forever waddling to the waters". Almost any village which had a mineral spring nearby, "holy" or not, now aspired to the status of a "spa".[6] Thomas Pennant, in an appendix to his *Tour in Scotland* (1772) enquired of the clergy of every parish in northern Britain: "Are there any mineral springs, frequented for the drinking of waters; what are they; at what season of the year are they reckoned best, and what distempers are they frequented for?" A number of these places developed into fashionable, elegant and prosperous towns; but many more enjoyed a brief moment of glory only to fall into rapid decline when the visitors – who were almost exclusively upper class, wealthy and accustomed to urban comforts – began to demand the provisions of facilities and entertainments which extended well beyond the mere imbibing of the waters. Bath, Cheltenham, Harrogate and Leamington still bask in the relict splendour of their heyday as centres of royal and aristocratic patronage, architectural sophistication, fashionable amusement, marriage contracts and questionable medical treatments. But where now are the blighted dreams of spas such as Boston, Astrop, Church Stretton, Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Gilsland? These, and a hundred others, failed to attract the commercial enterprise, medical publicity and wealthy clientele which were the keys to success.[7]

Gilsland? A tiny hamlet on the edge of the wilderness in a remote and forgotten corner of northern Cumbria. It would be preposterous to compare such a place with the cultured elegance of the more famous English "spaws" and yet, for over two hundred years, Gilsland Spa was a well-known and popular resort, patronised by the gentry from the Border Counties and beyond, boasting many of the facilities and a little of the sophistication of the society governed by the code of Beau Nash. The new Spa Hotel, built in grandiose style in the 1860s, offered standards of comfort and entertainment comparable to those to be found in most other resorts of the day. Guests found rooms furnished and equipped with the best of late Victorian design and invention, dining rooms, drawing rooms, ladies' rooms, card rooms, billiard rooms and a daily programme of recreation and entertainment arranged for all who wished to take part. A Quadrille band played each evening; regular and formal dress-balls were held in the summer season; and in the extensive and well-tended grounds were lawns for tennis, croquet and bowls, with terraced walks leading down through woods and flowering shrubberies to the spectacular gorge of the River Irthing. Here was a riverside walk with bath-houses, bookstalls and refreshments and the fountain of malodorous medicinal water which had drawn folk to this spot for more than two

thousand years. Daily carriage excursions were organised to take visitors to Naworth and Corby Castles, to Hexham and Lanercost Abbeys, to Carlisle and to the Roman Wall – or, for the intrepid and energetic, tours into the wild moorlands towards the Scottish Border.

Gilsland could never aspire to be another Bath, or even another Buxton, but given its geographical remoteness and its largely provincial clientele, its success as a spa resort is remarkable when other, more favoured, aspirants fell by the wayside. The waters of Gilsland received an authoritative boost in 1857 when the *British and Foreign Medico-Chirugical Review* pronounced that "the pure sulphuretted waters, powerfully charged with this gas and containing little else" were most efficacious in the treatment of rheumatism, dyspepsia, hepatic infections and skin diseases,[8] thus confirming precisely the view expressed by William Camden in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.[9] These were all latter day revelations, however, for the virtues of Gilsland waters were certainly known to the Romans who dedicated an altar found nearby to the local water gods.[10]

Long after the Romans had departed their rituals must have persisted here, for they were eventually taken over by the monks of Lanercost Abbey who walked in procession on St John's Day (24 June) each year to hold a service of Christian blessing at the fountain head; a ceremony which may have had its distant origins in a pagan summer solstice festival. This medieval Christianisation of the Gilsland waters survived the Reformation without interruption. William Camden in 1586 tells us that the spring was much frequented by both Scots and English and, a generation later in 1625, local aristocratic interest is revealed by the visit of Lady Elizabeth Howard of Naworth Castle. Almost a century later Gilsland is, for the first time, given the status of a "spa" and its somewhat mephitic water re-endowed with its medieval virtues of curing "itches, scabs and ulcers".[11] In 1733 the local Justices received a Humble Petition from a poor labourer, Edward Bullman, of Lanercost, who had been crippled for over five years and was unable to support his family. He had been advised "to goe to the Bathing Wells" but he could "scarce walk upon crutches" and so he petitioned for money "to By him a horse to Carry him to the Wells . . . that he may Endeavour to get his health to provide for his family".[12] Unfortunately we do not know the outcome of his Petition but it does indicate a continued local faith in the powers of healing in this bounteous spring, a faith which fifty years later had clearly spread far beyond the neighbourhood of Gilsland.[13] For there were then three guest houses to accommodate visitors to the developing spa: Orchard House, Wardraw House and the newly-built Shaws, offering simple hospitality, the last having a drawing room for the gentry, a stone-flagged parlour for "the second class", and outhouses for "the poorer sort". Here, we are told,[14] all the forms and fashions of the better and superior hotels at the well-known spas were followed and, although it was all far removed from the Royal Crescent at Bath or the new splendours of Cheltenham or Leamington, the minor gentry of the northern counties began to flock to Gilsland in search of recreation, amusement, lively company, a change of air, and to seek a cure for their real or imagined ailments. For the most part, however, it would seem that many visitors spent their time in drinking, gambling, dancing and making love.

Mrs Kitty Senhouse came here in 1782 but was apparently less than enthusiastic about her course of the nauseous medicine. Her husband wrote instructing her "to

be pleased to continue where you are . . . to make a more complete trial of the waters."[15] A few years later Robert Burns visited this "celebrated spa" to be followed in 1797 by his fellow-countryman, Sir Walter Scott, whose stay soon became a memorable occasion. For it was here that the 26 year old barrister and cavalry officer, out riding one day, met a young lady "than whom a lovelier vision could hardly have been imagined". The gaiety of the evening balls at Shaws provided opportunities to cultivate the lady's acquaintance and within a matter of days the romance had made such rapid progress that Scott felt able to propose marriage,[16] a momentous occasion which took place at the now famous "popping-stone" at the end of the riverside walk on the banks of the Irthing: "sharp work" commented a later visitor, "for a poet who was quaffing not of the fountain of Hippocrene but of the fetid stream of Gilsland – by no means an inspiring beverage". Neither this nor Dr Granville's subsequent remarks would have pleased Miss Charlotte Mary Carpenter who clearly reciprocated Scott's genuine love for her: "Prudent mammas" he advised, "who are anxious to see their daughters speedily and well-settled in the world had better look to the Spas of England." Scott put his visit to Gilsland to another good use in his novel "Guy Mannering" much of which is set in the vicinity of Gilsland. Here were the haunts of Meg Merrilies, Tib Mumps and Guy himself, with Mumps Hall nearby.

Dr August Bozzi Granville published his volumes on *The Spas of England* in 1841 and, for the most part, they present a useful account of all the principal resorts of the time with knowledgeable analyses of the mineral waters, their chemical properties and their medicinal virtues. For good measure Granville offers a lively description of the facilities provided, the quality of the entertainment and his assessment of the company likely to be found. Of Gilsland he observed that "The lower and middle classes of society have their spas as the great of the land have theirs. . . . Gilsland is just such a place". A judgement which, unfortunately, sets the tone for the remainder of his distinctly disparaging verdict on Gilsland Spa, regrettably influenced by his obvious wish to promote a rival resort developed at Shotley Bridge by one of his friends.[17] So, we are informed, Shaws is but a sorry house of accommodation where masters and servants "bathe in the same rooms, nay, in the very identical tanks. . . . This is primitive . . . and so are the baths themselves as well as the bathing rooms, erected in the guise of low ordinary cottages, on the very margin of the river immediately opposite to the spring. Nothing could be of ruder aspect . . . than this establishment, and the visitor must be little squeamish, indeed, who can long continue to use such rooms and such bathing tanks." The water, he concedes, is "clear and limpid; indeed, the finest crystal spring could not be more so" but it smells and tastes strongly of sulphur, creates an unpleasant "eructation of gas such as we may perceive after eating hard-boiled eggs" and it also causes headaches. Even so, some found it pleasant to drink and it was not as disagreeable as the Harrogate water. Furthermore, Granville found the scenery at Gilsland "nothing but a vast expanse of hilly country, grey, sombre and leaden coloured". After no more than a twelve-hour overnight stay he departed, thoroughly disgruntled, expressing no surprise that Gilsland was "indifferently frequented and at best only by very so-so classes of people".

These so-so people, clearly unimpressed by Granville's strictures, came to Gilsland in ever-increasing numbers and, after the opening of the railway and the

building of new Spa Hotel in the mid nineteenth century, the resort entered on a period of popularity and prosperity which was sustained until the 1930s. Resplendent in its shining white Italianate brickwork the Hotel offered accommodation and facilities "not inferior to that of any place of resort in England". The mineral waters had received authoritative medical plaudits; and the landscaped gardens and woodlands, the enchanting walks and terraces, the River Irthing with its spectacular gorge and quaintly named Cramel Linn waterfall, the wild moorlands beyond and, not least the associations with Meg Merrilies and Guy Mannering, gave Gilsland all the ingredients of the late Victorian dream of the romantic and picturesque. Mrs Eliza Lynn Linton, grand-daughter of the Bishop of Carlisle, may have found the resort "a queer, roughish, provincial and eminently one-horse place" but she clearly appreciated the comforts of the hotel and the efficacy of the waters which she confidently expected to make her "strong and as good as new", thereby demonstrating rather more faith in the Gilsland waters than her grandfather's eighteenth century predecessor, Bishop William Nicolson, who came here in 1711 and declared the spa to be "more famous than it deserves".[18] Few heeded the Bishop's pronouncement in any age for in 1926 a local guide book asserted that in the summer season spa visitors are to be numbered in thousands rather than scores with every house in the neighbourhood called upon to provide accommodation.[19]

These were to be the final years of the spa-cult, however, and in common with almost every other spa resort Gilsland soon fell into rapid decline. The twentieth century had brought about fundamental changes in English society and in theories of medicine which, accelerated by the profound social and economic effects of two devastating wars, dealt a fatal blow to the entire fabric of the spa economy. The more famous resorts which had grown into elegant and wealthy towns were able to adapt and survive; those such as Gilsland sank into almost total neglect and oblivion. Today the Gilsland Spa Hotel still attracts many discriminating visitors seeking something of the dignity and grandeur of a past age and a place of quiet seclusion from a stressful world. The gardens, lawns, tennis courts and woodland walks are still there to be enjoyed; the riverside terrace remains but now neglected and without its bath houses, bookstalls and refreshment rooms; the "magic waters" still pour from a restored well-head; the river still swirls over its rocky bed just as Granville described it – "brown as the best London stout, and as frothy".

Gilsland was not the only spa resort in Cumbria; indeed, it was not even the most renowned. There were numerous other mineral springs but few were graced with the title of "spa" and most were little known outside their own locality; rarely becoming more than the popular watering-holes they had always been, even though their waters might boast the same properties and medical virtues as those of more famous resorts. Such were the wells at Bewcastle, Biglands, Brampton, Gilcrux, Great Salkeld, Kirkbampton, Kirkland Wyton, Melmerby, Sebergham, Chalkfoot and Stainton (Carlisle). The springs of Gilderdale Fell, near Alston, and at Rockcliffe were notable less for any curative virtues than for their unusual attribute in producing tinctures, the former "a yellow ochre and a Spanish brown", while the latter was said to "tint paper a beautiful gold".[20] Very few of these have any significant recorded history. Among those which achieved a footnote in history were the saline springs in Borrowdale and at Stanger Spa near Cockermouth.

Many of the early guides to the Lake District include a reference to the salt wells

in Borrowdale but only as an historical source of salt for the monks of Furness Abbey to whom the valley once belonged.[21] In fact, there is no record of the manufacture of salt at this spot, not even in that most meticulous and comprehensive inventory, the Report of the Commission of Dissolution in 1537. The Great Deed of Borrowdale of 1555 includes salt as one of the minerals included in the sale of land in the valley but without detailed specification. Nor, it may be added, is the climate of Borrowdale notably propitious for the process of evaporation which was the usual method of salt production. Not until the eighteenth century is there any reference to the medical properties of these springs. In 1766 Thomas Short's *Treatise on Cold Mineral Waters* asserted that the Manesty waters would ensure "a rough, severe purge to a strong constituency", an aperient apparently of sufficient popular appeal to encourage the building early in the nineteenth century of a bath-house, open and free to anyone whose skin or digestive system felt the need of this drastic but no doubt beneficial treatment. This has now vanished almost without trace.[22]

Stanger Spa in the Lorton Valley likewise has only a sparsely documented history but in 1829 it was said to be much frequented in the summer season by invalids from the surrounding country.[23] This aperient salt spring was compared to the waters at Cheltenham, with a high impregnation of marine salt and with similar commendations for the treatment of disorders of the skin and the digestive tracts.[24] The folk of Cockermouth made a stroll to Stanger a regular Sunday afternoon outing, and a stone building was erected over the well to provide shelter and seating. The well itself was neatly lined with dressed stone and niches were placed in the walls for the drinking vessels. Bottles of Stanger Water were for a time dispatched to many parts of the world, a tribute to local enterprise and perhaps an indication that the spa here had acquired a much wider fame than the records suggest. Today the map states merely "Holy Well-Stanger Spa (dis)" and the well with its shelter are falling into dereliction. The saline waters which once cost sixpence a bottle flow with undiminished vigour and are free to all who pass that way.

Spas were found in many strange and unexpected locations but none more so than Gutterby Spa, the only named feature on the long, ten-mile stretch of sand and shingle which forms the coastline of south-west Cumbria. This, too, is a saline spring similar in composition to the waters at Cheltenham, and when William Hutchinson wrote his *History of Cumberland* in the 1790s it was reputed to be "a sovereign remedy for the scurvy and the gravel".[25] The spa was apparently "much frequented" when the Park family lived at Whitbeck nearby in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is mentioned in Parson and White's *Directory* for 1829 and in William Whellan's *History and Topography of Cumberland and Westmoreland* in 1860, but both references seem to suggest that this was a spa resort which depended largely on the patronage of that particular family, and when this ceased Gutterby Spa could no longer survive in such a remote and exposed situation on one of England's most unfrequented shores. Even so, as Whellan acknowledged, "Many persons have benefitted by the use of this water".[26]

Another "Holy Well", with a longer recorded history, springs from the base of Humphrey Head, the narrow peninsula projecting into Morecambe Bay at the tip of the coast of Cartmel. This remote and now forgotten "spa", once the property and resort of the Canons of Cartmel Priory, was much frequented in the late sixteenth

century according to Camden's *Britannia*,[27] with a diverse clientele charmingly identified by a Victorian writer as "the rich voluptuary, the poor mechanic and the laborious miner".[28] It seems improbable that such "gentle" families as the Fells of Swarthmoor Hall or the Brownes of Troutbeck who sought relief from these waters would recognise themselves in any of these orders of society but Sarah Fell's Account Book for 1674 records a visit to Humphrey Head, where she paid the considerable sum of nine shillings for the use of the waters, and Thomas Browne's Accounts for 14–16 July 1779, refer to a three-day visit when he drank the waters and bathed in them.[29] One might be forgiven for some speculation as to the nature of the ailments which afflicted these good gentlefolk in the light of an analysis in Charles Leigh's, *Natural History of Lancashire and Cheshire* (1700), which maintained that ague, worms and jaundice could be treated here, although the waters were most notable for their efficacy in curing diseases contracted by miners working in the Alston lead-mines – not, one would have thought, an occupational hazard likely to have troubled the Fells or the Brownes. Until comparatively recent times the Alston miners continued to put their faith in regular visits to Humphrey Head where they drank a gallon of the water each day to purge the poison from their bodies and bathed to cleanse their skins of various cutaneous complaints. An aged dame presided over a hot cauldron of the water with more than twenty miners gathered round the door of her ramshackle hut nearby. This was all a far cry from the Assembly Rooms at Bath and their genteel patrons but when a chemical analysis in 1867 established that the waters of Humphrey Head were comparable to those of Cheltenham, Carlsbad and Baden-Baden and when heated were almost identical to the renowned spas at Wiesbaden and Kissengen, there were those who saw a splendid future for Humphrey Head, but they built castles in the air: the Cartmel dream of an elegant Pump Room and Spa Hotel was never realised. By the end of the Victorian era a local historian was lamenting a sharp decline in the number of "health-seeking pilgrims" and attributed this to the shock of the chemical analysis which, he alleged, "broke the charm with which traditional piety had surrounded the fountain of Humphrey Head".[30] It might be nearer the truth to accept that by this time the whole spa-cult in England had passed its heyday and if ever Humphrey Head had entertained hopes of achieving greater renown it was now too late. Perhaps we are fortunate that this pleasant headland today is known for its Nature Reserve, its splendid seascapes (compared by some to the Bay of Naples), and its variety of bird-life rather than for a grandiose "Spa Hotel", symbol of an age long past.

A similar purging spring was discovered at Witherslack in 1656 when a group of children attempted to quench their thirst on a hot day at a local water-hole. The drastic results attracted attention and it was not long before all kinds of "miracle cures" were being reported from the well. Thomas Machell, Chaplain to Charles II, listed some of them in his *Antiquary on Horseback* published in 1692: Kathleen Barwick of Halecat cured of jaundice, Robert Weston of Sedgwick cured of worms, John Watheman of Carnforth cured of leprosy, a woman of Gressingham was relieved of tympany.[31] The versatility of the waters of Witherslack impressed Thomas Short who added inappetency, cachery, gravel, corpulency and dropsy to the catalogue. Indeed, Short was quite overwhelmed by the spell of Witherslack: "Sure England has scarce another such Romantic place . . . all charmingly beautiful

with shrubs and plants".[32] This "romantic" spa enjoyed almost two centuries of local sanctity but by 1829 Parson and White's *Directory* records that it had entirely disappeared. Spa Lane is its only memorial today.[33]

Other "Holy Wells" may be found on the earlier Ordnance Maps of Cumbria, many of which acquired their holiness from their close proximity to a church of ancient foundation.[34] A good example is the Holy Well of St Mungo at Mealrigg near the Norman church of Bromfield, a spring which, certainly in the late eighteenth century, had a local reputation. William Hutchinson, writing in the 1790s, informs us in a guarded comment that, "There is a spaw here, supposed to possess considerable virtues, which, however, have never been clearly ascertained."[35] By the mid nineteenth century the patrons of these humble waters seem to have transferred their allegiance to the more sophisticated surroundings of Gilsland.

It was just at this time that Cumbria's best-known spa was about to achieve social and medicinal eminence. There would seem to be few spots less likely to become a fashionable watering-place than the bleak, chilly, rainswept, windswept moorland heights of Shap. Yet for three-quarters of a century the gentry and the *nouveaux riches* journeyed to the Shap Wells, as they did to spa-resorts in much gentler surroundings, to participate in the rituals of "taking the waters" and, perhaps more especially, in the accompanying social and recreational pastimes without which no gentleman's summer was complete. Much was made in Shap's publicity brochures of the excellent grouse-shooting on the Earl of Lonsdale's moors, the proximity of Lowther Castle and its gatherings of famous and titled names, the bracing air, the nearby attractions of the Lake District, and, of course, the efficacy of the waters which, it was emphasised, were milder than those of Harrogate and similar to those at Leamington, then the newest and most fashionable resort and favoured by Royalty. And what Victorian hypochondriac or listless gentlewoman could resist the blandishments and medical promise of the 1844 handbook which proclaimed that these sulphur-laden springs were "beneficial to every organ with chronic ailments" and also "dyspepsia, liver disorders, the nervous system, glandular swellings, cutaneous infections, rheumatism, scrofula, calculi, dropsy, lung problems and diseases of the skin." All accompanied by a resounding medical testimonial designed to dispel any doubts which might remain about the virtues of a visit to Shap: "In all my experience I have met with no medicated spring more generally efficacious than the Shap Spa in raising the energies of the debilitated stomach and inspiring the whole frame with a new animation, giving to the blanched and cadaverous cheek the glow of health, and to the turgid and spiritless eye the sparkle of life and energy."[36]

Shap Wells could clearly cater for all who felt the need for the water-cure and with the opening of the Earl of Lonsdale's new Spa Hotel and the arrival of the railway in 1848 Shap Spa was firmly on the map of English Spa Resorts. The construction of a simple but elegant well-head adorned with an impressive stone base, probably filched from Renaissance Florence, the erection of a thirty-foot high monument with bas reliefs of the British Lion and the goddess Hygeia to commemorate the coronation of Queen Victoria, and the planting of picturesque rhododendron groves and formal gardens, completed the transformation of a primitive water-hole into an inland spa with the essential ambience and much of the opulence of resorts of greater renown.

For many guests at Shap the comforts and cuisine of the new hotel must have

been a distinctly more attractive proposition than the prospect of regular immersion in, or frequent doses of, the unappetizing waters with their unpleasant sulphuretted smell, described by the local folk as "train smoke mixed with bad eggs". Dr Granville gave a vivid account of his visit to Shap, full of praise for the hotel but less than enthusiastic about the water which he characterised as "transparent but not limpid" with "several little floating bodies whitish and milk-like suspended in it", coloured rather like a "weak solution of soap and water" and the surface covered with a thin scum "through which bubbles of gas from the bottom are seen to burst from time to time". The sulphur smell, he found, was "very marked" and "instantly after drinking a glass and a half [he] experienced headache and eructation of the sulphuretted gas". He conceded that when heated the water lost these unappealing aspects and lay "more comfortably on the stomach". The medical eulogies he regarded as "too near an approach to the region of poetical fancy" to be taken other than "cum grano salis".

In contrast he found the accommodation "very convenient, commodious and well-arranged". He occupied "a double room facing the south which would not have disgraced a first-rate hotel in London; nay, for cleanliness, abundance of furniture and contrivances, as well as for the excellency of the beds, far superior to most of them. No expense seems to have been spared to make the inmates comfortable. The drawing-room, though not large, is excellent; and so are the dining and other sitting rooms". Granville awarded a final accolade to the servants who were "of the best description both as to looks and appearance, and as being well-behaved and attentive". Nor did he demur from the claims of the hotel handbook which assured its guests that "Every delicacy of the season is supplied to tempt the weak, sickly stomach of the invalid or to gratify the more capricious one of the epicurean tourist or traveller".[37] While the fashionable world indulged its love-affair with the spa-waters Shap could not fail to please and for Victorian and Edwardian England its seventy beds were not one too many.[38]

Before its transfiguration in the 1840s Shap "spa" had been a very rudimentary affair. Although known to the Romans the well has no recorded medieval history but it was sufficiently patronised in the seventeenth century to justify the construction of a bath-house and a place of accommodation for visitors. This "bleak, dingy, smoky old house" and an "old peat-cote with a rusty iron pot heated over burning turf, whins and heather, and an old hogshead for a bath" created a scene of primitive rusticity which is given a certain Arcadian charm by the story of the attendant whose task it was to carry the buckets of water from the spring to the "bath". He was "exceedingly attentive, so much so that, regardless of the victim's sex, he would put his head over the edge and enquire 'Enny more het?'"[39] The Earl of Lonsdale's grand design was to replace this bucolic idyll with all the facilities, comforts and luxury of a Victorian Spa Establishment with a standard of dignity worthy of a resort on the estates of the north's premier landlord. His wealthy patronage could never give Shap the distinctive elegance which the Duke of Devonshire created in Buxton but until the tide of fashion decreed that Baden-Baden and Aix-les-Bains were preferable to Bath and Leamington (or any other English resort), the prosperity of Shap Wells was assured.

This Edwardian desertion of English spa-resorts by the upper classes was compounded by the social, economic and cultural upheavals brought about by the

First World War. When the reality of these changes began to dawn there was no longer a place for the Spa, either as a holiday resort or as a temporary rest-centre for rich hypochondriacs or even as a hunting ground for aspiring mammas with nubile daughters. By the 1930s all that was history. Henceforward in the twentieth century although the English continued to waddle to the waters – in ever increasing numbers – it was not to the spa resorts they made their way but to the seaside. Today the Shap Wells Hotel is still "a green and cheering oasis surrounded by mountains thickly clad with heather" and Dr Granville would not wish to modify his praise of its facilities but the Florentine well-head, the bath-houses and the monument to Queen Victoria are not quite so unblemished by the passage of time. The age they served has long since passed away but is still, perhaps, too recent in our history to merit the attention of the "heritage industry".

None of the mineral springs of Cumbria could ever have aspired to the social and architectural eminence of such towns as Bath, Leamington or Harrogate or even to the modest grandeur of Buxton, Malvern or Tunbridge Wells. They were cut off from the mainstream of London Society, they were remote and isolated from the major road system, they lacked a wealthy aristocratic clientele or even a substantial body of landed gentry; they were set in an environment unpromising in its economy, its geography and its climate. After a brief age of fashionable and popular patronage all have fallen into varying degrees of dereliction and oblivion. The late twentieth century may have been inveigled into purchasing millions of expensive bottles of mineral waters each year but this represents a lack of faith in the public water supply rather than a revival of a mystic faith in the natural springs. The sulphurous and saline waters of Cumbria's "holy wells" are very much an acquired taste and not easily marketable in an age which prefers its water to be odourless, tasteless and crystal clear.

In its declining late-Victorian years the spa-cult in England received a new lease of life with the development of hydropathic institutions. These were well-appointed hotels, often of substantial size, set in attractive grounds and offering a wide variety of facilities, both indoors and outside. Their purpose was the commercial exploitation of the popular enthusiasm among the wealthy and leisured upper and middle classes for the "water-cure". Every hydro was provided with a suite of treatment rooms and baths equipped with the latest scientific devices designed to inflict ordeal by water on the human frame. Resident doctors and nurses supervised individual courses of treatment and prepared an appropriate dietary regime for each "patient". An essential requirement for such institutions was a plentiful supply of water: water to be consumed in several large tumblers before breakfast and at intervals during the day; water for Turkish baths, Russian baths, Wave baths, Sitz baths; water for massive ice-cold douches and needle sprays; water, hot and cold, for indoor and outdoor swimming pools; and, for the truly desperate, water for the electro-magnetic bath, then the very latest invention, where (as patients were quite accurately informed), "The application of electricity through the medium of water offers a method whereby the whole nervous system may be powerfully affected".[40] For those who survived these rigours – and by no means everyone did – the sheer relief experienced when the treatment came to an end must, one suspects, have guaranteed a more sprightly step and a more buoyant attitude to each new day. It was to be many years before another, more enlightened, generation came to the

conclusion that the fresh air, vigorous exercise, healthy diet and change of company and environment offered by a stay at these institutions did far more for their "patients" than most of the hydropathy to which they were subjected. The warm baths and regular swimming would undoubtedly be beneficial for many ailments: the shock treatments must have depended on individual response and experience.

The hydros injected new life into a number of spa-resorts, some of which developed into modern seaside and inland holiday centres with all the entertainments and other "attractions" associated with such places of recreation. But hydropathy itself was doomed with the advance of scientific medicine and with the refusal of the National Health Service to accommodate these methods of treating illness within its embrace.

The concept of the hydro originated in the hilly, inland spa towns of Ilkley and Matlock, and it was not long before entrepreneurs were looking to the congenial environment of the well-watered hills of the Lake District. Grandiose schemes were planned for hydros at Grasmere, Grange-over-Sands, Windermere, and Plumgarths on the outskirts of Kendal. Of these all but the first appear to have had a half-century of prosperity; Windermere, in particular, achieving a national reputation fully justifying the optimism of its "Invitation to Investors". Plumgarths was a more modest establishment but could assure potential guests that "there is an efficient supply of water, cold or warm, for Treatment carefully and scientifically adapted to each case, and a Dietary as liberal and varied as the laws of health will permit". Every variety of hydrotherapeutic apparatus was available and "quiet and agreeable domestic pastimes" were encouraged. Guests would be met at Kendal, Burneside or Windermere stations; the post arrived each day at 7 a.m. and letters were despatched at 8.30 p.m.; and First Class patients could be accommodated at a charge of £2 15s. [£2.75] per week inclusive of Board and Lodging, Medical Advice and all Treatments. Furthermore, as the brochure waxes lyrical, Plumgarths is in "one of the most picturesque and healthy parts of the kingdom . . . visited alternately by the fine-tempered breezes of sea and mountain, its atmosphere is peculiarly pure and invigorating; while there is the advantage of easy access to the Lakes with the additional one of being sufficiently removed from their humid exhalations".[41]

The advertising copy for Windermere Hydro also emphasised the climatic virtues of the establishment as well as all its other attractions and facilities: "For a winter retreat it has the advantage of many hydropathic centres – its mild mountain air has not the bitter keeness of Ilkley, whilst it has a vitality and power to invigorate lacking in many places and its rainfall is less than in other parts of the District". Water for the many bathrooms was "abundant and excellent" and came from the "copious springs in the lower spurs of the High Street range". All patients could proceed direct from their bedrooms to the baths "in greatest privacy" along two corridors (one for gentlemen and another for ladies) and there they would find every up-to-date facility awaiting them, including, as one astonished visitor exclaimed, "the biggest baths with the biggest brass taps and plughole bungers I have ever seen". The whole hotel was heated "with hot water apparatus" but each of the sixty-seven bedrooms also had its fireplace – "the most healthy mode of ventilation".[42] After the grand Opening Dinner on 25 March 1881 the *Westmorland Gazette* praised the new Hydro fulsomely, describing in detail the large dining rooms and drawing rooms, the ladies' drawing room, the correspondence rooms, the billiard room, and the offices

for the doctor and the matron. The furnishings were "conspicuous for elegance and good taste" while the furniture apparently surprised the *Gazette*'s reporter with "a style and elegance throughout the whole house that we had not expected to find". The well-tended grounds had lawns for tennis, croquet and bowls; a skittle alley and a conservatory; several terraced walks "with entire privacy for each", and a splendid promenade with views over the lake and out to the lakeland fells. Altogether, the report concluded, Windermere Hydro "might fittingly be styled the home of hydropathy".[43]

This combination of luxury hotel, health resort and social and recreational centre had more in common with the elaborate Roman *thermae* than with the simple rusticity of the remote medicinal springs and medieval Holy Wells – or even with the concealed squalor and bizarre etiquette of Beau Nash's eighteenth century Bath. After two thousand years the social rituals of the water-cult had come full circle.[44]

Notes and References

[1] For a discussion of the efforts of the Church to control belief in magic before the Reformation see G.L. Kitteredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (1929; reprint New York, 1956), Chapter II.

[2] Details of some of these may be found in: J.B. Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain* revised by Sir H. Ellis (1813 edition), 259–72; R.C. Hope, *The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England* (1893); K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971. Penguin edition 1973), 54–55, 88.

[3] See K. Thomas, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3, "The Impact of the Reformation".

[4] E. Peacock, *Notes and Queries, 2nd Series*, i (1856) 415.

[5] Quoted by R.L. Leonnard, *Englishmen at Rest and Play* (Oxford, 1931), 3, from William Harrison's "*Description of England*" (1577).

[6] R.L. Lennard, *op. cit.*, Appendix I, gives a list of English Spa Resorts in the late seventeenth century. Thomas Short's *Essay towards a Natural Experimental and Medicinal History of the Principle Mineral Waters* (Sheffield, 1740) lists 131 "spaws" in England. The small Belgian town of Spa, already a flourishing resort in the sixteenth century, gave its name to all such watering places.

[7] For a general study of the development of the English spa resort see F.A. Alderson, *The Inland Resorts and Spas of Britain* (Newton Abbot, 1973).

[8] *The British and Foreign Medico-Chirugical Review*, April 1857.

[9] William Camden, *Britannia* (1586), II, 1038.

[10] The Duke of Northumberland has at Alnwick Castle a patera of the type often deposited in sacred wells in Roman times as sacrificial offerings. It bears a crenellated pattern with raised towers and the Roman names of four of the western forts on Hadrian's Wall. This artefact was found in Wiltshire in 1725 and is known as The Rudge Cup. It is referred to in John Horsley's, *Britannia Romana* (1732), 329–31 where he postulates that it probably originated as an offering at the Gilsland well, a tenuous theory which few would now support. The cup is illustrated in *CW2*, i, 70.

[11] T. Robinson, *An Essay towards a Natural History of Cumberland and Westmorland* (1709), 45.

[12] Cumbria Record Office (Carlisle) Q11 1733/Mids 3.

[13] J. Housman, *A Descriptive Tour and Guide to the Lakes* (Carlisle, 1800), 426–7.

[14] For much that follows concerning Gilsland Spa see A.B. Granville, *The Spas of England* (1841, reprint Bath, 1971), 314–26.

[15] Cumbria Record Office (Carlisle) D/Sen/6/20.

[16] J.G. Lockhart, *Life of Scott* (1838), 74–79 tells the full story of Sir Walter's romantic encounter at Gilsland.

[17] A.B. Granville, *op. cit.*, cxx, 284, 306–09.

[18] Bishop Nicolson's Diary, 20 June 1711, *CW2*, iv, 53.

[19] W.G. Bird, *Gilsland and Neighbourhood* (Carlisle, 1926).

[20] D. Lysons and S. Lysons, *Magna Britannia: being a concise topographical account of the several counties of*

Great Britain (1816), Vol. IV, cxvi–cxvii where there is also a reference to a chalybeate spring close to the Gilsland Spa which was discovered in 1811. Stainton: I am indebted to B.C. Jones for a reference to the sulphur spring at Stainton, near Cargo. This appears in the Will of Joseph Read, merchant of Carlisle, dated 1713, and it makes clear that the Spa was associated with Kingmoor House and was equipped with a bath house and set in its own pleasure grounds. The racecourse was nearby which may have encouraged its use. The 1745 Jacobite army chose to make its encampment by the River Eden in close proximity to the Spa but this may have been accidental.

21 T. Pennant, *Tour in Scotland* (1772), 46; J. Housman, *Descriptive Tour* 97.

22 C. Kipling, "The Borrowdale Salt Spring", *CW2*, lxi.

23 J.B. Bradbury, *A History of Cockermouth* (Chichester, 1981), 3.

24 Lysons and Lysons, *Magna Britannia* Vol. 4, cxv, has a chemical analysis of the mineral spring at Stanger.

25 W. Hutchinson, *History of Cumberland* (Carlisle, 1794), Vol. I, 552.

26 W. Whellan, *History and Topography of Cumberland and Westmoreland* (1860), 499.

27 W. Camden, *Britannia*, Vol. II, 981.

28 R. Charnock, *Composition and Medical Qualities of the Cartmel or Flookburgh Mineral Waters* (Ulverston, 1816). Quoted in H. Barber, *Furness and Cartmel Notes* (Ulverston, 1894), 166.

29 *Household Account Book of Sarah Fell, 26 June 1674* (Cambridge, 1920), 91. *Browne Accounts, 14–16 July, 1779* (CRO (Kendal) WT/TE 8/5).

30 H. Barber, *op. cit.*, 164–71.

31 Thomas Machell, *Antiquary on Horseback* (transcribed by Jane Ewbank, Kendal, 1963), 80. (CW Extra Series XIX).

32 T. Short, *op. cit.*, 55–56.

33 G.P. Jones, *A Short History of the Manor and Parish of Witherslack to 1850* (Kendal, 1971), Appendix II (CW Tract Series XVIII).

34 For these "Holy Wells" see T.H.B. Graham and W.G. Collingwood, "Patron Saints of the Diocese of Carlisle", *CW2*, xxv, 17–27; W.G. Collingwood discusses the Holy Well and Chapel at Gosforth in *CW2*, ii; R.C. Hope, *op. cit.*, has several references to such wells.

35 W. Hutchinson, *History of Cumberland*, II 299; J.B. Brand, *Antiquities*, 265.

36 R. Alderson, *A Chemical Analysis and Medical Treatise on the Shap Spaw in Westmorland* (Kendal, 1828), 16–22, 25–26.

37 *Handbook to Shap Spa* (1850), 20.

38 A.B. Granville, *op. cit.*, 331–9.

39 J. Whiteside, *Shappe in Bygone Days* (Kendal, 1904), 322.

40 *Brochure for the Windermere Hydropathic Establishment*, (1881), CRO (Kendal) WDY/93.

41 *Prospectus for Plumgarths Hydropathic Establishment near Kendal*, (1867), CRO (Kendal) WDX/275.

42 v. Note 40.

43 *Westmorland Gazette*, 26 March 1881, 8.

44 The owner of land near the shoreline at Flookburgh has recently investigated the water issuing from a Spring there and has established that it is of a very high standard of purity. Analysis revealed that although trace elements of some fifteen chemicals are present in the water none is of any great significance in itself. The water has already proved extraordinarily beneficial to sick horses and claims for its medical virtues for human ailments are sure to follow. The Spring flows at the rate of 20 gallons every minute at all times, many times in excess of the ancient saline Holy Well at Humphrey Head less than two miles away. Application has been submitted and approved for the establishment of a Spa and bottling plant at the site and the owner hopes to be in business by 1994 if all remaining difficulties are resolved. The land was under the sea until it was reclaimed in the late 18th century and was subject to inundation during violent storms in the 19th century but extensive embankments now protect the area from further encroachment.