



Move to Bath Spa

A gorgeous honey-coloured city of gentle crescents, classic architecture and historical remains, Bath Spa has been a popular destination for generations of pleasure seekers, which makes it a pleasant place to live, too **Words** Lesley Gillilan

ENGLAND HAS a wealth of glorious cities, but how many of them are as ravishing or as perfectly formed as Bath Spa? Indeed, this World Heritage city, North Somerset's Cotswold beauty, seems better endowed than really seems fair. Aside from steamy baths and original Roman plumbing, it's a honeypot of Palladian architecture; a picturesque urban landscape of mellow Bath stone, Corinthian pilasters, replica temples in botanical gardens, the Pump Rooms, the Cathedral, all splayed out on the banks of the River Avon and founded on a miracle of nature.

If it feels a little unreal, it's as well to remember that Bath is basically a glorified leisure centre, based almost entirely on its mineral springs. The only naturally hot springs in Britain, they produce some 250,000 gallons of water a day – gushing from fissures of carboniferous limestone beneath the Mendip Hills. Without them we wouldn't have had Roman *Aquae Sulis*, nor Georgian England's fashionable neo-classical resort, nor even today's busy Bath Spa.

The downside, of course, is the crowds of visitors who pour into the city, pretty much all year round. Living anywhere within the heritage circle means putting up with busloads of tourists snapping away at the masterpieces of the John Woods (the Older designed Queen Square and the Circus; the Younger designed the Royal Crescent). An everyday shopping trip can mean elbowing through gaggles of language students, street performers and Blue Badge guides. But the upside is great shopping and a rich cultural life.

Aside from the annual Bath International Music Festival (25 May–5 June this year), there are theatres, museums, parks, Arcadian vistas and, so they say, enough restaurants to provide a different eating experience every night of the year.

Architect Mark Wray studied at Bath University (home to one of Britain's best schools of architecture) and after seven years in London returned to the city – partly to join new practice Designscape and partly to marry his girlfriend and start a family. 'There is a real vibrancy to the place,' he says. 'And it's easy to live in – you can walk everywhere, there are lots of green spaces



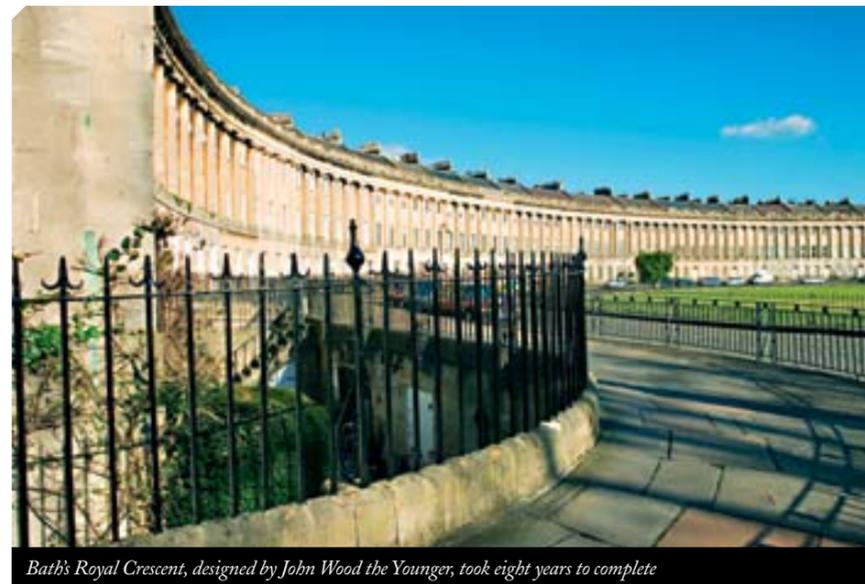
The River Avon flows through the centre of Bath towards Bristol

and plenty to do.' He eulogises about the 'consistency of Bath stone', the roar of the crowd on rugby days (Bath Rugby team is in the Aviva Premiership), the good rail connections to London. 'It really is a beautiful city,' he says.

What can you buy?

Nowhere does a better line in eighteenth-century Regency terraces than Bath Spa. Arranged in tiers of mellow Bath stone, on the hillsides that slope away from the city centre, they form sweeping circles, magnificent garden squares and

ornate crescents. Many of the city's Georgian townhouses remain intact – though some are uber-expensive – but even in conversions, the apartments tend to be roomy, or even palatial, and most have classic original features. Clever conversions include the former Empire Hotel, now serviced apartments for well-off older people. Inner Bath is big on cellars and wrought-iron verandahs but small on gardens. As for parking – you'll be lucky. On the outskirts, you'll find farms, country villas, Cotswold villages and surprisingly large amounts of local authority housing.



Bath's Royal Crescent, designed by John Wood the Younger, took eight years to complete



Queen Square is the largest square in the city

Trevor Smithers AFP/Alamy; Mark Bolton Photography/Alamy; Terry Matthews/Alamy; Graham Bell/Alamy

Building from scratch

In Bath's heritage central you practically need listed building consent to change the colour of your front door (there was an almighty row when one owner covered the regulation white with tasteful green), so don't expect an easy ride. But the city has managed quite a few modernist one-offs over the years, a recent example being award-winning, timber-and-glass house Twinneys (featured in *GDM*, September 2010), built on a green-belt site by Bath architect Designscape. Building plots do come up from

time to time – at a price (a city plot with planning consent for a contemporary house is currently on the market at £250,000), but in general, wrecks, conversions, extensions, renovations and rebuilds are the easier options.

New developments

It was three years behind schedule, but Grimshaw Architects' snazzy Thermae Bath Spa complex (completed in 2006) showed what can be done – even in the midst of ancient *Aquae Sulis*. The restoration of the city's thermal spa – after 25 years of disuse – has returned Bath to its roots with the help of Millennium Commission funding. The New Royal Bath's light glass facade may be radical, but it blends in beautifully by mirroring the city's surrounding architecture. And the views from the steamy rooftop pool are among the best in town. More recent, and more rural, is Foster & Partners' CircleBath (a twenty-first-century private hospital set into its hillside site on the edge of greenbelt land, to the south-east of the city).

The final phase of the new £360million Southgate shopping centre opened last year. Ditto Eric Parry's glass-and-ceramic extension to the nineteenth-century Holburne Museum. And still on the drawing board is Crest Nicholson's mixed-use Bath Western Riverside scheme – a new urban quarter of some 2,000 homes. But shiny new developments rarely go up without a fight: the James Dyson Foundation's plan to build a School of Design Innovation came to nought after lengthy planning battles and problems with flood risk on the chosen site. →



The Roman Baths are a popular visitor attraction

'It still has the feeling of an old house'

The raw material for Giles and Heidi

Thompson's Bath-stone villa was a pre-1860 one-up-one-down, which they bought three years ago, empty and derelict. 'What started off as a renovation job just got grander. We didn't extend – we knocked down and rebuilt,' says Heidi. Working with architect Mark Wray at Bath practice Designscape, the couple set out to get more light into the dingy north-facing rooms, to make existing rooms more useful and to retain some of the property's original elements. The key feature is a new glass and timber-clad entrance leading into a double-height hall. 'Although it's all crisp and white, it still has the feeling of an old house,' says Heidi. 'I'm really glad we went the whole hog – anything else would have felt like a compromise.'



Famous people

Bath was Georgian society's fashion city, an in-crowd health resort overseen by dandy Master of Ceremonies **Richard 'Beau' Nash**, but in household names it leans more towards literati than glitterati. Among its most celebrated residents were artist **Thomas Gainsborough** (lived in Bath circa 1759) and English novelist **Jane Austen** who spent six years there from 1800 (*Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were both set in the city). Later, regular visitor **Charles Dickens** satirised Bath social life in *The Pickwick Papers*. And much later, Bath gave birth to **Anne Widdecombe**, Eighties synthpop band **Tears For Fears** and musical comedian **Bill Bailey**.



Twinneys won the residential category at the RIBA South West Town & Country Awards 2010

Getting there

Couldn't be easier, really. A doorway off the M4 corridor, Bath has excellent road and rail connections between London (115 miles west) and Cardiff (55 miles west). Bristol is only 12 miles – or 20 minutes – away. Fast rail connections between Bath Spa and Paddington (90 minutes each way) make it possible to do a daily London commute (people do); a future plan to electrify the route will cut the journey time by 20 minutes. But be warned: this is one of the most expensive routes on the network. A standard return fare starts at £48.80, but leaps to £159 during peak hours. The nearest international airport is Bristol.



Southgate shopping centre



Theatre Royal Bath is one of the oldest in Britain

What's the cost?

It's not cheap; not by anyone's standards. Top of the range are complete, multi-storey Georgian townhouses (a cool £4.5million for a Grade I-listed property in Royal Crescent; around £1.5million on one of the lesser terraces) or country houses on the perimeter (upwards of £750,000 for anything decent). On Royal Crescent, £425,000 merely buys a one-bedroom apartment; in Cavendish Crescent you get two beds for £400,000. Smaller Georgian townhouses sell for around £600,000. Best bet in the budget range (under £300,000) is the sandstone Victorian terraces (circa £280,000) in, say, Camden, Larkhall or south of the river (the cheaper side of town). Twentieth-century semis at the duller end of suburbia (Weston or Combe Down) can be bought for around £200,000. **GD**

What's on offer? *Take a look at this pick of properties for sale in and around Bath's historic city centre*



From £2million

Modern classic Not quite what you'd expect of Bath, this post-war house has three bedrooms, an annex and 12.7 acres. Savills (01225 474 500; savills.co.uk).



£575,000

Period gem An attractive townhouse on Brunswick Terrace, with five bedrooms and open-plan ground-floor living space. Knight Frank (01225 325 999; knightfrank.com).



£330,000

High rise At Weston Park, on the edge of the city, this Grade II-listed, two-bedroom apartment occupies the tower of a converted mansion. Savills (as before).