

Mayor's Guide

“1,000 years of history in about six seconds, coming up”– Daisy Game takes a whistle-stop tour of Bath, courtesy of The Mayor of Bath's Corps of Honorary Guides.

The streets of Bath are thick with a cool January mist. The clouds are heavy, the sun still in bed. I have to admit, I'm a little bitter that the morning on which I'm to take one of the Mayor's Guides Tours of Bath is on the duller side of things: for the past three days, the skies have been a burning winter blue.

But this is to be an education, I reprimand myself. Bristol-based (something I later admit to a chorus of pro-Bath heckling) this city is new to me, and I'm looking forward to learning more about it. Besides – I'm getting the more authentic version of things this way. City records suggest that since Alderman Sturge-Cotterell first established The Mayor's Guides in 1934, the walks have stopped for nothing and no-one, taking place twice a day (once on Saturdays) every day of the year (all bar Christmas) whatever the weather – and whatever the war. Even as WWII bomber planes threatened to put an explosive end to the urban rambles, the Mayor's Guides continued to usher visitors along the streets of Bath: keen to show off their city, no matter what world-altering event was taking place. Until the Coronavirus Pandemic, that is, when any trip which took you beyond the parameters of your living room was dubbed Strictly Off Limits.

Shuffling my way through the damp and into the Bath Abbey Courtyard (the starting point for all tours) I'm met by a jovial group of guides. Each spends the few minutes we have to spare (morning tours begin at 10.30am sharp) attempting to convince me that his or her tour is by far the best of the bunch. There is a real sense of camaraderie: it's as though I've stumbled into a school reunion of sorts. Which shouldn't come as a surprise, considering how long some of the guides have known one another; a select few have been touring Bath for the best part of four decades. I'm introduced to the charismatic Terry, who has spent the last 33 years showing visitors around Bath – and who is the most adamant that his tours are the cream of the crop. Just as I'm about to set off on my own walk – led by Colin – I feel someone nudging in next to me. “Good luck,” Terry winks, sticking a thumb in Colin's direction before disappearing into the misty morning. I begin to thaw a little.

Our route (which takes around 2 hours to complete) is a jam-packed one. After a whistle-stop tour of the Abbey's exterior (points awarded to anyone who can spot the upside-down angel engraved into its facade), we make our way toward The Cross Bath: an open-air thermal bath fed by one of the town's three hot springs. Peering in through the glass windows, we get a glimpse of the steamy waters which, Colin informs us, were once believed to possess healing powers. Well, they certainly worked for Mary of Medina, who – after months of failed pregnancy attempts with husband James II – is said to have emerged from the water with a babe in the belly. A neat (if somewhat alarming) trick.

From here, we take a turn up Milsom Street, making our way toward John Wood The Elder's Circus and John Wood The Younger's Royal Crescent beyond, before looping back to end where we began: in the shadow of the Abbey. Despite successfully rattling through the majority of Bath's landmarks, our pace is gentle and considered; no walker is left behind, and there is plenty of time to ask questions. Colin assures us that the tours are meant for anyone with an interest in – well, anything. In fact, those wanting to delve into a particular part of Bath's history are more than welcome to get in touch with the Mayor's Guide Group and ask if a tailor-made tour might be run. The Guides have a wide variety of interests, Chair of the group Andy tells me: so, if Jane Austen's your thing – there may well be a guide keen to tell you a thing or two about Bath's literary heroine. Or if *Bridgerton* is more your (steamy) pace, you might just meet a Mayor's Guide who is equally thrilled to discuss the petticoats and parties of the 2019 Netflix hit – much of which was filmed in Bath. Colin could even be the man for that job: as we cross Pulteney Bridge, he makes sure to point out The Holburne Museum, which played a starring role as Lady Danbury's 'modest' mansion.

Colin is not alone in his enthusiasm for Bath. With 83 guides trained and ready to tour, and seven more currently undergoing their six-month training, there are plenty of Bathonians willing to chat about their UNESCO World Heritage home. Which is lucky, considering the popularity of the walks: in peak summer, it's not unusual for up to 180 visitors to gather expectantly in the cool shade of the Abbey. Even on a cold January morning, I am one in a group of around 20. Demand, it seems, matches supply. The number of guides posted each day depends on the number of visitors who have booked onto the tours using the new online system, which was recently introduced. Other than this digital development, however, everything remains traditional. Just as they were in Sturge-Cotterell's day, the Mayor's Tours are led on an entirely voluntary basis: Guides can't accept cash rewards, even from the most determined of tippers.

While many tour-takers are from out of town, Andy tells me that he's keen to see more locals taking the opportunity to learn about their city. Whether you've lived or worked in Bath for one year or 50, there's always something new to learn, the Chair stresses. It's true: whilst some of the names and locations mentioned may be familiar to those in the know (Ralph Allen, The Roman Baths, party boy Beau Nash and so on) other stories are a little more underground. Colin tells us an amusing tale about Jane Austen's shop-lifting aunt, who once decided to steal some fabric from the haberdashers which, 250 years later, has been replaced by an Ecco-shoes store. "On the surface, it's all elegance. But going on in the background are all sorts of fascinating stories", Colin muses. He takes particular relish from exposing the seedy underbelly of Bath's Regency period; from riots to financial scams, to public hangings, Bath may look pretty, but she played dirty. As we pause to take in what is perhaps the town's most recognisable landmark – the Royal Crescent – Colin draws our attention to door No.2, behind which one Mrs McCartney once resided. McCartney was a real (Georgian) party girl: wealthy enough not to have to concern herself with tiresome affairs such as suitors and children, McCartney instead spent her days – and her dollar – throwing huge parties for Bath's best. Were one to receive an invite, it would be foolish to refuse: this lady had the power to ruin your reputation in an instant. Colin tells us about one particularly raucous evening in 1781 when, after several disgruntled guests found McCartney's wine cellar to

be locked, the soiree ended with a food fight (chicken wings were chucked) and what local papers referred to as a 'dust up'. After a two-year party-ban, a night at Mrs McCartney's doesn't sound half bad to me.

When it comes to the towns in which we live and work, we never really take off the school uniform. For out of towners, tours like this are a wonderful way to get a taste of Bath's long and elaborate history. But for locals, the tours act as a reminder never to stop asking questions: why is that house raised higher than this one? Why is there an acorn carved into this stone? And what's going on behind the closed door of No. 2?