

HISTORY SOCIETY MEETING THURSDAY 11 OCTOBER 2018

A GRAND TOUR - EARLY TOURISTS IN THE HIGH WEALD - IAN BEAVIS, CURATOR OF THE TUNBRIDGE WELLS MUSEUM



It all started in 1606 when Dudley Lord North became bored while recuperating from heavy socialising at the Court of James I. He was staying at Eridge Park when he discovered a spring of orange water on the Rusthall Estate and after drinking it daily he declared that it had completely cured him. Back in London news of the Chaylebeate Spring spread rapidly. People came to take the waters and have a holiday but as there were no inns the visitors had to lodge in farmhouses and cottages. Previously, visitors from London had only travelled as far as Tonbridge because the road over the Weald was barely passable.

In 1629 the first Royal visitor, Queen Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles I, came to stay for six months. By this time a well had been sunk. The Pantiles, known as 'the Walks' were laid out as the first pedestrian walkway with square paving stones donated by Queen Anne. Lord Muskerry's wife had developed Mount Sion as lodging houses. 33 years later King Charles II stayed at Mount Ephraim House while his courtiers camped on the Common. The church of St Charles the Martyr was built and paid for by subscriptions of people visiting the Pantiles. The bird's eye view painting of Tunbridge Wells from 1700, above, shows visitors parading along the Pantiles towards the Chaylebeate Spring in the Triangle with the Church beyond.

Tunbridge Wells became the centre for touring Kent and Sussex. Richard Bonash 1735-1761 was the Master of Ceremonies and he developed entertainment for the nobility, gentry and learned professions who came to the town. The Chalybeate Spring was at the centre and the waters cured many of the ailments that people had. A typical day for a visitor could include taking the waters, morning service, tea drinking, visiting a coffee house, the assembly rooms, library, milliners, jewellers, dinners, balls, horse riding on the common or attending lectures 'without fatiguing the intelligence'. One particular shop held raffles but the winners had already left the previous week so there was no winning ticket (scam). The MC ensured there were plenty of opportunities for visitors to spend their money. Tunbridge Wells was a fantasy world of splendid attire, decorum and all ranks being equal!

Jasper Sprange ran a one man tourist information service producing guide books and maps of places of interest. He also maintained a list of royal visitors and gentry who were in residence at any particular time.

The more famous souvenirs were the trinkets made by the wood-workers. Eventually they spread throughout the south-east.

This time of tourism for the elite drew to a close with the coming of the railway in 1845. Tunbridge Wells, the earliest tourist centre, became a residential town with tourism for the masses while the nobility and gentry moved to the seaside.