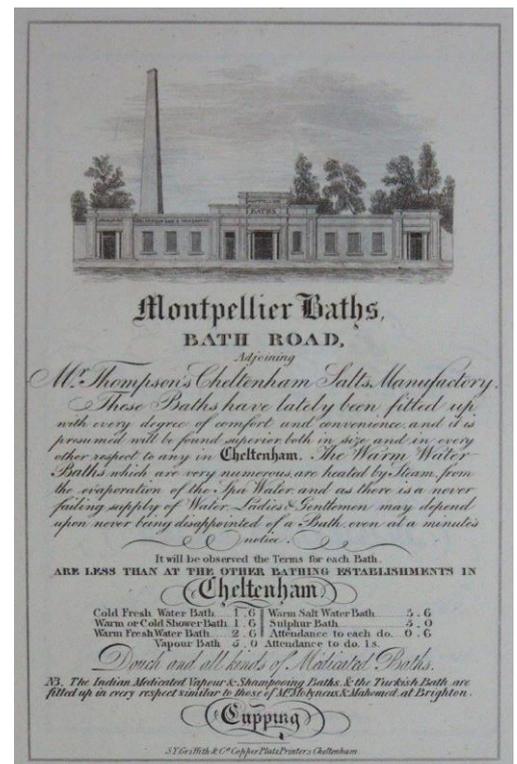


A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BUILDING CURRENTLY KNOWN AS CHELTENHAM PLAYHOUSE, BATH ROAD

In 1801, the entire Montpellier estate was bought from the Reverend Delabere by Henry Thompson and the first building on the site was erected circa 1806/7 comprising six public baths (the largest of which was just under 19ft long x 9ft wide), an early form of steam room and a machine with which you could administer yourself an enema – even choosing the temperature and force of the water used!

There was also a crystallizing room for the creation of salts to add to the water and shortly afterwards these were christened as “The Real Cheltenham Salts” and available to be bought by the general public not only in Cheltenham but in London. The building was therefore known as either Thompson’s Baths or Thompson’s Salt Manufactory or Laboratory and later simply The Montpellier Baths.

Water was piped here from across the Montpellier area (although later it also made use of its own on-site wells) and became increasingly successful. Further water baths and showers were added in 1818, together with medicinal air, steam and vapour baths, with further enlargements taking place in the mid-1820s after Pearson Thompson took control following his father’s death. The establishment was very much frequented by the better classes; in 1828, the Duke of Wellington (then Prime Minister) visited at 4 pm every day for a fortnight and had a special bridge placed over his bath to enable him to read his newspapers without them getting wet.



Advertising from 1824

The laboratory for the creation of the salts had also been considerably enlarged (much of it was underneath the current box office and foyer) and by 1836 the building even had its own steam-powered flour mill and bakery - which made use of the energy produced by the boilers used in the salts manufacturing process – but both both seem to have ceased operation during the 1860s. The mill and bake ovens were part of what is now the theatre’s scenery workshop but the bakery shop was on the corner in the current empty unit (not controlled by the theatre).

Although two of the baths had been described as large enough for swimming, the first really sizeable pool opened in 1847. In later years a proposal was made for a second pool of identical size, but this never came to fruition. There was, however, a smaller second swimming pool that could be hired out for private parties and was later assigned exclusively for women.

Pearson Thompson made huge changes to the landscape of Cheltenham but was perhaps not the greatest businessman, often taking out huge mortgages and eventually relocated to Australia where he later died. As a result, the property went through several owners and lessees during the latter half of the 1800s, including the Globe Insurance Company and the Cheltenham Montpellier Gardens Company which started running the complex from 1870 (although purchasing it at a later date) after another extensive refurbishment.

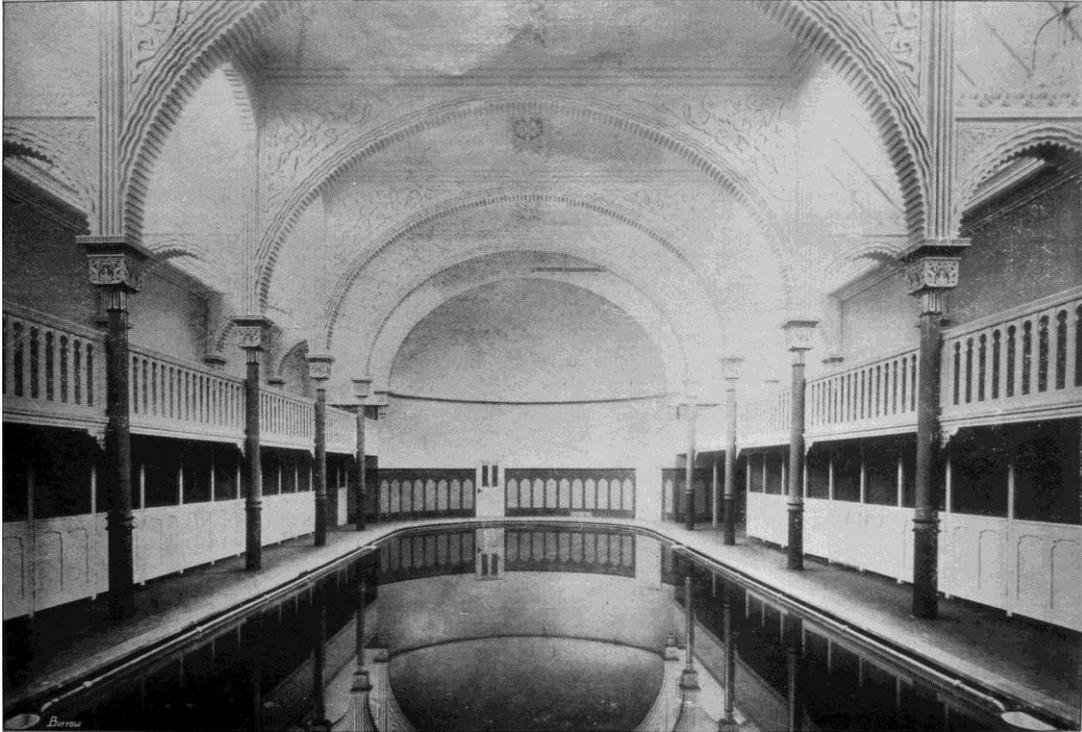


In 1881, Captain Webb, the first man to successfully swim the English Channel in 1875, visited the Baths to talk about his accomplishment and people could challenge him to a race in the swimming pool (his feat had made him quite the celebrity). Two years later he died undertaking a stunt swim beneath the Niagara Falls. Swimming competitions - sometimes involving the need to carry an umbrella - and water polo matches were a regular feature along with swimming exhibitions, where one of the superintendents used to dive into the pool from the roof of the building.

An 1883 photograph of Captain Webb

The pool was frequently boarded over to enable the large space to be used for other purposes. One of the main uses included a gymnasium and an indoor cycling school which was the scene of a tragic accident in 1896 when 11-year old Lillian Davies pulled out the pins of one of the telescopic legs of a 16-stone heavy vaulting horse which promptly caused it to imbalance and come crashing down on her skull.

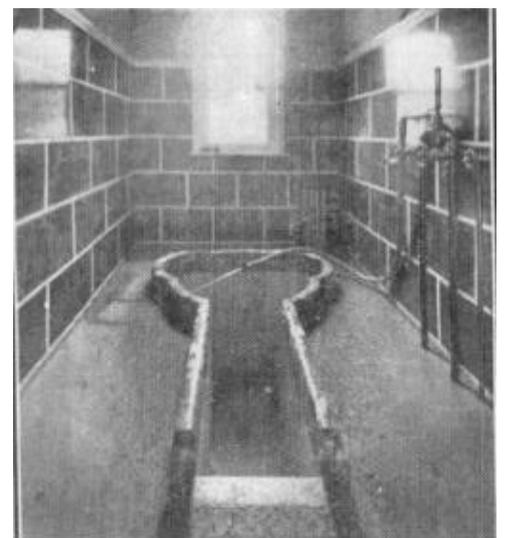
There were seven deaths in the building prior to conversion to a theatre and we're reputed to have three ghosts. Is it a co-incidence that the most frequently seen ghost in the theatre is that of a little girl sitting on the stage?



The Corporation of Cheltenham purchased the establishment in 1899 and reopened the Baths in September 1900 after a long period of closure for refurbishment (*the photo of the main swimming pool, above, was taken from what is now the stage*). Many local tradespeople were involved in the renovations including the firm of H H Martyn who undertook panelling work on Cunard and White Star Line ships, including (it is believed) the Titanic.



The council added many slipper and medicinal baths with further additions made in 1916 and 1920. You were no longer able to administer yourself an enema but you could partake of a radioactive mud bath! The pool continued to be covered over for St John's Ambulance competitions, dinners for soldiers on leave during the First World War, fancy dress balls, Mrs McLellan's Foxtrot and Tickletoe Club and, in 1920, a waltzing competition.



Electro treatment and Sedative Pool

The Baths never made a profit for the council and by 1939 the exterior was looking derelict so during World War II they were closed to become an ARP Centre and the home of a division of the St John's Ambulance. Discussions and calls for a home for local amateur theatre began in 1944 – spearheaded by town clerk Frank Littlewood, whose father was editor of *The Stage* newspaper - and the swimming pool area was converted to become the Civic Playhouse which opened in April 1945 making it, as far as we have been able to ascertain, the only new theatre to begin operating during World War II. The pool remains under the auditorium today where it is used as a furniture store. The former ladies swimming pool is also used for storage under the current dressing rooms.

The theatre gave its first performance on 9 April 1945 with an amateur production of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms & The Man* and the playwright himself sent a telegram of congratulations to the council for their initiative. Cheltenham-born actor Ralph Richardson was another to send his good luck to the enterprise.

The rest of the building continued to be used for both medicinal treatments and bathing into the late-1950s when volunteers took over the running of the theatre from the council. While treatments ceased, you could continue to take a bath in the upstairs portion of the complex right into the 1970s.

The auditorium retains much of the original appearance of the 1900 pool, such as the balconies and arches, although it no longer has glass ceilings (destroyed by fire in 1950). It was last refurbished in 2008 after the floods of 2007 – at least the fourth flood the building has endured in its fascinating lifetime.

