

# THE WATER CURE

By Ken McNaughton

People who live in more salubrious climates would not normally think of visiting the United Kingdom for the sake of their health, except perhaps for one place. In a list of twelve geothermal springs in the U.K., five of the twelve occur in one small town. The temperature of these five springs varies between 42.8 and 47.2 degrees Centigrade, whereas the other seven vary between 17.2 and 36°C. Not one of the twelve is in Scotland. By some definitions, the last seven don't even qualify as "hot springs." The first five occur in Bath, Somerset, 100 miles west of London.



**Figure 1. The current Bath Abbey was started in 1499.**

Long before the Romans invaded Britain the Celts treated the main spring at this site as a shrine dedicated to the goddess Sulis. The Romans identified Sulis with their goddess Minerva but continued to use the name Sulis, and named the town Aqua Sulis, meaning the waters of Sulis. They constructed a temple in 60-70 A.D. and built up a bathing complex over the next 300 years. When Rome was threatened in the first decade of the 6<sup>th</sup> century the Romans in Britain were recalled and the baths fell into disrepair. The town fell to the West Saxons in 577 AD; the Anglo-Saxons called it Baðum, meaning "at the baths," which is the source of the current name, Bath. In 675 a monastic house was set up and in 781 a monastery and a church dedicated to St. Peter. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century King Alfred the Great laid out the town afresh, leaving the south-eastern quadrant as the Abbey precinct. Edgar was crowned King of England at Bath Abbey in 973.

Today Bath is a World Heritage Site whose center includes the Roman Baths and the current Abbey, begun in 1499 (Fig. 1). A lot of restoration work has been done and it is possible to see and explore ancient ruins along with more modern developments. At the heart is the sacred spring, where a million liters a day of naturally hot water have bubbled up from deep underground for many centuries. This water fell as rain up to 10,000 years ago on the nearby Mendip Hills and contains 43 minerals to the tune of 2.18 g/l. Calcium and sulphate are the main dissolved ions with sodium and chloride also important. The water is low in dissolved metals, except for iron. You can see the remains of the Great Bath where the Romans walked on 2,000-year-old pavements beside the steaming pool (Fig. 2). And there are the ruins of the temple of Minerva, goddess of the thermal spring. In medieval times cures for conditions such as paralysis, colic, palsy and gout were sought from bathing in spa water. The fashion for drinking spa water arose from new medical ideas in the later 17<sup>th</sup> century.

## JOHN ROSS MCNAUGHTON

My great great grandfather John Ross McNaughton left Scotland in 1838 with his wife and one-year-old daughter and settled in Melbourne where they had ten more children. Forty-four years later, between 29 January and 5 February of 1874, John collected five references. One from the Rev. D. MacDonald said he was “*returning to Europe partly for the benefit of his own health.*” Rev. Andrew Robertson said he was leaving “*for Scotland chiefly for the sake of his health.*” Thos. McPherson, late Lord Mayor of Melbourne, to whom John had been well known “*for upwards of thirty years,*” wrote to Mr. John Cochran, an engineer in Barrhead, Glasgow, that John “*has been poorly for some years and his medical adviser wishes him to proceed to England for a change.*” David Wilke MD, who had known John and had been the medical attendant of his family “*for the last thirty-four years,*” said “*He has not enjoyed very good health of late years &*



*being anxious to educate his son for the medical profession in Scotland he has made up his mind to return at all events for a few years,*” but did not mention his own involvement in such a decision.

**Figure 2. You can see where the Romans’ sandals wore away these paving stones by the side of the pool.**

John and his wife Agnes left Melbourne aboard the ss *Great Britain* on 6 February 1874 [1]. They would have traveled through iceberg-carrying seas and around Cape Horn. Colin, who was 15, started

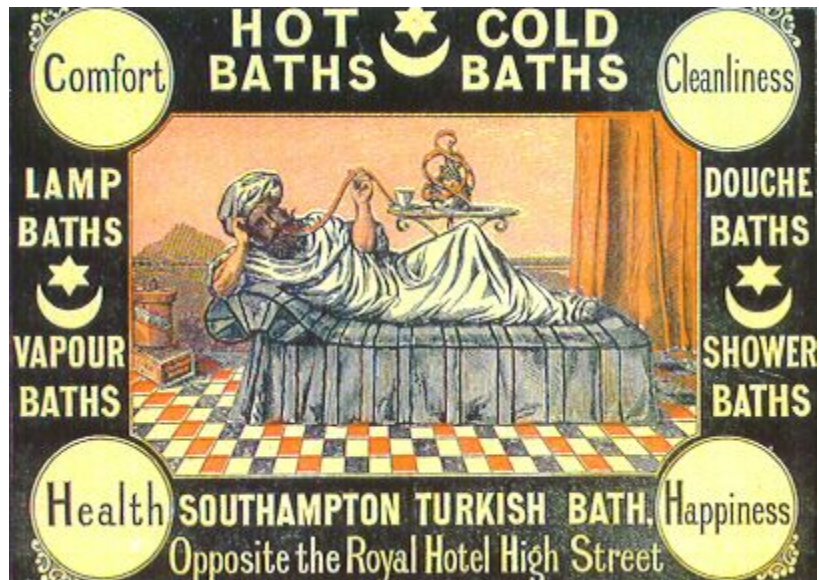
high school in Edinburgh on 15 May, and was presumably with them. Colin had two months vacation in July and August, stayed with his mother and father for three weeks in Renfrew, near Glasgow, and took a trip with his father in southwest Scotland. Colin also visited Braemar, near Balmoral, with the schoolmaster, who may have had a home in the area. John traveled widely, in Scotland, Ireland and England but did not indicate if Agnes and Colin were with him. Starting in September, John wrote a series of letters from 395 Govan Road, Govan, near Glasgow, where he and his wife were staying with his daughter’s aunt, presumably a sibling of John or his wife. Colin was living in Edinburgh with one of the high school masters.

On 23 September John wrote one of his daughters—probably 24-year-old Agnes—as he had just learned in a letter of two deaths in his Melbourne family. He spoke “*of the very sad and awful death of your sister Christian at Sandhurst [now called Bendigo] it has Caused us great Greif ... We are also very sorry about the death of your Brother Johns Baby ... Your mother is in the enjoyment of good health ... Colin is in good health ... Your aunt and your cousin ... are both in fair health ...*” He did not comment on his own health. Two months later, on 18 November, he wrote his son John in Melbourne: “*I am sorry to inform you that since I wrote last. last I have Been very unwell I am very much troubled with Rheumatism all over my Joints I am suffering very much from the Cold weather we had frost and snow on Wednesday last week we Expect an early winter Dr Freer has ordered me to take Turkish Baths [Fig. 3]. I have had 6 of them and some Chemical Baths and hot salt water spray Baths at Dr. Patersons Hydraphy Baths Rothsay wher I was for 12 Days at the Rate of 10/- Per Day I am also suffering very much on account of*

*the news of your Last letter Giving me the account of the death of your son and the very awfull and Suden Death of your sister Christian.”*

**Figure 3. Turkish Baths were very popular in England and Scotland at the end of the 19th century but were not really Turkish (copyright Malcolm Shifrin).**

On 22 May 1875, eight months after John wrote this letter, Fredk. A. Freer, Police Surgeon, wrote from the Police Chambers in Govan: “*A gentleman from Melbourne named John McNaughton has been residing here for more than year sent hither by his medical adviser for the purpose of regaining his health and partly for the education of his son. Mr. McNaughton has been under my care for all sorts of supposed bodily complaints for several months ...*”



### THE HYDROPATHIC MOVEMENT IN SCOTLAND

Back in 1838 John made a five-and-a-half month journey from Scotland to Australia around the Cape of Good Hope, during which they faced pirates and lost 60 passengers to typhoid fever. He must have suffered enormous hardships operating a ferry across the Yarra, laboring on Major Mitchell’s estate at Barfold, ferrying goods to the goldfields in a bullock dray, and raising a family in the new colony of Port Phillip. He was now 60 and must have had some nostalgia for the country of his birth and some pride in having been successful and wanting to have his son Colin educated for the medical profession in Edinburgh. John gave two reasons for returning to Scotland—not to see his relatives, with whom he and his wife seem to have stayed for some time—but for his health and for Colin’s education. How important was it for him to visit Scotland for his health?

Hydrotherapy, or hydrotherapy, involves the use of water for soothing pains and treating diseases. It dates back to ancient cultures from China, Japan and most recently to the Thermae, or Roman Hot Springs. After disappearing during the Middle Ages, hydrotherapy was rediscovered during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a formal medical tool it dates from about 1829, when Vincent Priessnitz, a Silesian peasant, developed the cure empirically and established the first and most famous water cure in Gräfenberg (Silesia was located between modern Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany). Hydrotherapy, based on the internal and external application of water, made its initial impact in Britain following the publication of Captain R. T. Claridge’s account of his visit to Gräfenberg in 1842. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the typical hydrotherapeutic establishment treated thousands of patients annually for weeks at a time in a large purpose-built building with lavish baths and recreation rooms under the supervision of fully trained and qualified medical practitioners and staff. Scotland was over represented with more than twenty [2]. The boom lasted from 1864 to 1882 and John McNaughton landed right in the middle, in 1874.

Dr. William Paterson's Hydropathy Baths at Rothesay—which were established in 1843 and by 1861 had at least 47 rooms—were fairly typical. Rothesay, the principal town on the Isle of Bute, is thirty-two miles west of Glasgow as the crow flies but requires a ferry trip across the Firth of Clyde. In 1874, John's treatment included six Turkish Baths. In a Victorian Turkish bath the bather sweats freely in a room that is heated by a continuous flow of hot dry air (or in two or three such rooms at progressively higher temperatures), followed by a full body wash (sometimes preceded by a cold plunge), then by a massage, and finally by a period of relaxation in a cooling-room (In Scotland in 2008 there are four establishments that provide such facilities, one in Dunfermline, one in Edinburgh and two in Glasgow). John also had some chemical baths and hot salt water spray baths, staying twelve days at ten shillings a day, equivalent to 33 GBP or 66 USD in 2007 [3].

The same day that John wrote to his son, 18 November 1874, he also wrote to his son's father-in-law, Robert Brown, at 433 King Street, Melbourne. He repeated he was "*very much troubled with Rheumatism Pains,*" added that Dr. Freer was "*next door to where I live*" in Govan, that he had also been treated in the "*Galvanic Bath,*" but apparently did not feel any better, concluding "*But I am sorry to say with [sic] much Benefical Result.*" This may have been because the treatments were not helpful, but he also had some other serious matters on his mind, as we shall see later. In a galvanic bath, the patient lies in a 34°C bath while gentle electric current is passed through his body for about 15 minutes. These are used mostly in the treatment of degenerative diseases such as inflammatory arthritis and problems with the joints. Jennie Kidd Trout played the most notable role in studying and popularizing galvanic baths. She was born in Scotland in 1841, moved to Canada with her parents in 1847, earned an M.D. in 1875, and was the only woman to practice medicine in Canada until 1880.

On 24 November 1874 John wrote again to his son: "*I am still at the Bridge of Allan and will b for 2 weeks their is A fine hydropathy Establishment here Dr. Freer the Dr. that attended me ordered me to Come her on account of them and the well sheltered Position of the Bridge of Allan. It is considered the Best sheltered Place in Scotland from the Cold & Snow storms and Cold East winds we have had showery and frosty weather this last week. There is A great many invalids her from all Parts of Scotland.*" Bridge of Allan is twenty-three miles northeast of Glasgow. The hydropathy establishment there opened in 1855. But no matter how comforting these establishments were, one still had to walk into and out of them, and winter was setting in. John must have spent a pretty penny on these treatments and seems to have been at the Bridge of Allan for a good many weeks. If he says he is "still at the Bridge of Allan," this implies he told his son about it in a previous letter, which probably was sent a week or weeks before by the Brindisi mail. While these accounts of John's medical treatments are interesting, they did not occupy the major part of his letters. His main concern was a dispute with his wife, which has been treated elsewhere [4] and he was also very upset by the two deaths in his Melbourne family.

John sent his youngest son Colin to school in Edinburgh; booked a passage on the world's first great ocean liner for him and his wife; traveled 70 days via Cape Horn; traveled extensively in England, Ireland and Scotland; spent weeks at fashionable spas in Scotland; and supported himself, his wife and his son for two years in Scotland. The three of them departed London by steerage on the *Durham* on 21 January 1876. We don't know if his physical ailments were helped but his troubles continued. Remember, shortly after he left Melbourne in February 1874 he lost a grandchild, Little Johnnie, and his daughter Christian. Four months after he arrived in Scotland, John wrote that his wife had made a Charge or Complaint about him in Melbourne and

he believed that, as a result, detectives from Melbourne followed him to Scotland. A relative of mine wondered if John had stolen Crown gold, but he may have suffered a delusional disorder. He does not qualify as what we would now call a paranoid schizophrenic. A year after John left Melbourne, his daughter Agnes died, aged 24.

Since Colin, aged 17, returned to Melbourne with his parents on the *Durham*, he obviously did not complete his medical studies. He died two years later, on 9 March 1878. John devoted himself to building a Presbyterian Church in West Melbourne and was made a Justice of the Peace [5]. He died on 18 July 1885, aged 71, of cerebral apoplexy (stroke). Five of his children



predeceased him; six survived. John left his estate to his son John and John's father-in-law, Robert Brown. He left his residence at 148 Lonsdale Street to his wife Agnes for life, all taxes and maintenance to be paid from his trust, plus 78 pounds allowance per annum. Any other income before her death was to be divided between four of his six surviving children—John, George, Peter and Jane; James and Alexander were to receive 100 pounds each. His wife Agnes died four years later, on 7 June 1889.

**Figure 4. In Bath the River Avon flows under the Pulteney Bridge past the Abbey quarter and the Roman Baths and then twelve miles west to Bristol.**

#### HYDROPATHY TODAY

In June 2008 I traveled to Bristol to see the ship that carried John and his wife from Melbourne to Liverpool in 1874 [1]. The ss *Great Britain* rests in the same dry dock where it was launched in 1843. Bath is only 12 miles ESE on the same Avon River (Fig. 4) that flows through Bristol and into the Bristol Channel that separates south western England from Wales. I spent half a day in the Roman Baths, took a delightful audio tour, and finished up by “taking the cure” in the elaborate Pump Room, which means quaffing a free glass of the metallic-tasting water. One of my most vivid impressions was that the Romans really knew how to live and I marveled at how much we have lost. The Romans came to the Baths for several hours each day to exercise, worship, relax, socialize and be healed, and we don't have an equivalent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 1997 there had been no spa in Bath for 20 years. That year the Millennium Commission announced a 7.78 million GBP grant to rectify this. As a result, in 2006, the Thermae Bath Spa opened—a complex of buildings close to the original Roman Baths that combines ancient architecture with state-of-the-art spa facilities, fed by the same hot springs (Fig. 5).

On Monday 30 June 2008, the day before I was to fly back to my home in the USA, I walked into the ground floor reception area on the corner of Bath Street and Hot Bath Street. A bewildering array of treatments was available—spa sessions, thermal treatments, Vichy shower,

Kraxen stove, massage, hot stone spa, body wraps, dry flotation, body care and facials. I booked a 4-hour session in the spa that cost 32 GBP, twice the rate that John Ross McNaughton paid in Rothesay, except he could afford to stay for weeks, whereas I could only afford half a day, without any special treatments.

**Figure 5. The Thermae Bath Spa combines the original hot spring with ancient and modern architecture and state-of-the-art spa facilities (Photo by Michael Maggs).**

I rented a white robe, towel and slippers and was given a smart bracelet, which allowed me to open and close a numbered locker in the first-floor mixed-gender change room where I was able to change in a small enclosed booth. I first made for the roof pool where I admired the 360-degree view around town. Then I tried the air jets in the various nooks of the pool. On the next



floor down there was a central circular waterfall with room for about four people back-to-back, unless you got there first and could have it all to yourself. Twenty feet away in each corner of the room there were four transparent circular booths about fifteen feet in diameter and in each booth, a different type of steam—dry, wet, eucalyptus and lavender. Around the walls there were foot baths and hot and cold showers. Finally, in the basement I found the Minerva Bath, like a large curved swimming pool with a depth of 1.35 meters. Gentle currents carry you around if you choose to float. At one side there is vertical pipe about eight inches in diameter that bends over at the top and angles down with a horizontal jet about 1/6 in thick (0.16 cm) and ten inches wide (0.25 m). This comes on for about five minutes every fifteen, so I learned to sit under it and wait. It fits perfectly across your shoulders by the time it reaches that level. Later I discovered there was a similar jet on the roof pool.

I moved happily between all three levels and chatted with other bathers. There was an elderly Englishman I encountered a couple of times and a couple who were born on opposite sides of the Atlantic and now live in America. Finally I met up with a lovely young Spanish girl from Barcelona who was living in London to learn English and worked at a tapas restaurant on Leicester Square. She and I bounced happily from spa to spa and I have no better memory of the day than when she would rise from our bench in one of the steam rooms, look over her shoulder and say “I’m going for a shower. You coming?”

I had been working hard at my holiday for a week—arranging all the transport, accommodations and tours, driving a stick shift on unfamiliar narrow winding one-way roads on the “wrong side” through numerous roundabouts, and taking various medicines, including one that made me nauseous and robbed my appetite. So these four hours in the spa were very welcome. Afterwards

I drove from Bath back to Bristol, lay on my bed at The Arches and stared out the window at the blue sky for two hours. It was the happiest two hours of my trip. I hope John McNaughton enjoyed his visits to the spas as much as I did. He deserved it. But John, tell me honestly, did you save up all that money, or was it a “government-sponsored” trip?

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