

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 6th century the Romans in Britain were recalled and the baths fell into disrepair. The town fell to the West Saxons in 577 A.D.; 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 9th 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 a cure for conditions such as paralysis, colic, palsy and gout was sought from bathing in spa water. The fashion for drinking spa water arose from new medical ideas in the later 17th century.

