

**The history of British spa resorts:
an exceptional case in Europe?**

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Resumen

Este artículo propone que desde el siglo XVIII los balnearios termales del Reino Unido han seguido una trayectoria única dentro del más amplio contexto europeo, que se concreta en la estructura de la red de balnearios, la falta de dinamismo desde principios del siglo XIX y la ausencia del papel innovador británico que se ha notado en otros aspectos de la historia del turismo. Trata también de explicar el temprano declive de los balnearios termales británicos y la ausencia de una respuesta efectiva frente a la competencia europea.

Palabras clave: Turismo, Balnearios, Salud.

Códigos JEL: N3, N5, N7.

Abstract

This article argues that the British experience of spa resort development since the eighteenth century has been unique in Europe, in terms of the nature of the resort network, the lack of sustained dynamism, and the failure of the British role in spa tourism to match the dynamic and innovative influence displayed in other aspects of tourism development. It also discusses the reasons for the early decline of British spas and their failure to respond effectively to European competition.

Keywords: Tourism, Spa resorts, Health.

JEL Codes: N3, N5, N7.



The history of British spa resorts: an exceptional case in Europe?

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1. Spa resorts and the history of tourism

The spa resort (in the historical usage of the term: a mineral springs resort where visitors ‘take the waters’ on the spot, whether by drinking them or bathing in them) is a European phenomenon which has its counterparts in other parts of the world. It has attracted the attention of historians, as the Spanish historiography makes clear, with prolific publications on the historical trajectories of individual resorts, of patterns of development across particular provinces, and even attempts at national surveys¹. This recognition of the importance of such sites of health and leisure tourism, whose histories connect several themes in an interdisciplinary way (politics, economics, transport, class and gender relations, art, architecture, literature, appreciation and exploitation of the natural world...), is in tune with the interest shown by historians from many European countries. The mineral spa resort has been a genuinely European phenomenon, with national and regional variations which have not inhibited individual spas from reaching out to elite and international markets. Within this context it is particularly interesting to note the exceptional case of the United Kingdom, where there were relatively few spa resorts (although some developed into important towns in their own right), which depended on the domestic market and lost their dynamism during the first half of the nineteenth century. Their customers among the aristocracy, landed gentry and wealthy business classes increasingly sought health and entertainment in French, German or even Spanish spas, and even in more distant countries. The limited development, and early stagnation and decline, of British spa resorts requires some

¹ Sánchez Ferré (2008); Monserrat Zapater (2001); Alonso Álvarez, Lindoso Tato and Vilar Rodríguez (2010).

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explanation, especially when we consider the innovatory role of the British in other aspects of the emergent history of national and international tourism in Europe (and beyond) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It is, indeed, reasonable to suggest that the most important innovations in tourism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had their origins in the United Kingdom, especially in England. The rise of tourism formed part of the first industrial revolution, a set of processes in which Britain was the pioneer ('the first industrial nation'), which had deep roots and developed over several generations, and which was based not only on the supply side (technological and organizational developments) but also on the growth of consumer demand not only at elite level, but also among the expanding middle ranks and even the emergent working class². It is important to emphasize that the development of modern commercial tourism, which formed part of the broader 'leisure industries' and 'consumer revolution', developed in conjunction with the British industrial revolution from the beginning, step by step, rather than being a consequence of industrialization, as assumed by French historians such as Boyer or Corbin³. This was not only a matter of the multiplication of goods, but also of consumer services, including the 'industries' of leisure, entertainment and sport, culture, holidays and tourism⁴. Such activities tend to remain hidden from the historian's gaze because they sell experiences, even dreams, intangible products which generate neither the convincing statistics which economists require for the construction of trends and comparisons, tables and graphs, nor the official files and reports constructed by and for officials and ministries, which constitute the usual sources for historians. For such reasons, together with the enduring perception that these are frivolous activities beneath the historian's dignity, the history of consumption, consumers and consumer practices (and especially that of tourism) has been slow to attract the attention of historians⁵.

Nevertheless, it is now making its presence felt, with a developing historiography which deserves to be taken very seriously, especially in the pioneering case of Britain⁶. We now have impressive contributions on the role of the British in the growing popularity of the European Grand Tour in the eighteenth century, and especially the cities and other sites of classical antiquity in northern Italy; on the extension of this kind of 'cultural tourism' to the emergent middle classes (professional, commercial and manufacturing) of the early stages of the Industrial Revolution in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century⁷; on the growth

² Fine and Leopold (1990); Berg (2005); McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb (1982); Lemire (1997); Weatherill (1996).

³ Boyer (2002); Corbin (1993); Walton (2002).

⁴ Borsay (2006); Hill (2002); Walton (2000b).

⁵ Walton (2009).

⁶ Berghoff, Korte, Schneider and Harvie (2002); Walton (2002); Durie (2003a); Furlong (2009); Zuelow (2009).

⁷ Black (1985) y (2003); Chaney (1998).

and articulation of networks of sea-bathing resorts along almost all English coast-lines from the second quarter of the eighteenth century, and the spread of seaside holidays to some sectors of the industrial working class by the later nineteenth century⁸; and on the role of the railways in the stimulation of demand for tourism, through faster and more comfortable journeys, branches constructed for the competitive initiation or development of tourist traffic to many seaports with adjacent beaches, special summer timetables and cheap tickets, and excursion trains⁹.

There is also a whole academic industry dealing with the history of the Thomas Cook travel agency, with many publications promoted by that same company and tending to represent Cook (and his even more entrepreneurial son John Mason Cook, founder of the imperial and global enterprise of the final decades of the nineteenth century), as undisputed leaders in the development of international tourism. This firm is genuinely important, of course, but what makes it stand out is more the survival of an exceptional archive, and its exploitation by the company for publicity purposes, than the uniqueness of the Cook enterprise in itself. It had important British rivals in Victorian times, such as the firms of Gaze and Frame, whose identities and archives have not survived: a lesson for all who wish to be remembered historically¹⁰. But it is also interesting that Cook's took no special interest in spas or, indeed, seaside resorts as such. What they promoted, above all, was cultural tourism, following the classic routes of the European Grand Tour; tourism to romantic and exciting landscapes (lakes and mountains); and religious tourism, taking groups of pilgrims to the Holy Land and other places mentioned in the Bible¹¹. Spas, in particular, remained (at best) marginal to their activities.

The Thomas Cook company thus played its part in the commercial exploitation of spectacular, historic or literary landscapes which might constitute objects of the 'romantic gaze' put forward by the sociologist John Urry¹². This way of seeing was also applied, especially after the mid-nineteenth century, to picturesque people as well as landscapes and buildings, and to those of their activities which might interest and attract the tourist: fisherfolk, rural rustics, traditional costumes, festivals and customs, and the quaint buildings and environments that were associated with such prized relics of the past, which could also (following current fashions) be sketched, painted and later photographed. Such curiosities and points of touristic interest were conspicuous by their absence in the inland spa resorts of England, on which this article will focus. What some English spa towns did come to share, but not until a touristic vogue for the historic and architectural heritage of the eighteenth-century built environment had developed during the twentieth century, was a heritage of attractive and interesting buildings to present to cultural tourists; but they never approached (for example) the combination of eccentricity

⁸ Walton (1983); Walton (1981); Brodie and Winter (2007); Gray (2006); Walton (2000a).

⁹ Simmons (1986); Smith (1988); Reid (1996).

¹⁰ Brendon (1991); see also Hanley and Walton (2010).

¹¹ Hanley and Walton (2010).

¹² Urry (1991) and (1996).

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and eclecticism that could be found, and exploited, in the fishing harbour districts of many British coastal resorts¹³. The dominant theme of spa resort architecture was the formal classicism of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century (which had its counterparts in coastal resorts). In the classic (in both senses) case of Bath, the most important British spa town, the innovatory analysis of Peter Borsay has explained the cultural and social roots of the twentieth-century construction of a sometimes controversial policy of defining and preserving the built heritage, especially during the challenging decade of the 1970s¹⁴.

2. The historiography of British spa resorts

Despite the importance of Bath and its pioneering role in the development of architectural heritage tourism in the twentieth century (which has extended to the preservation of the Victorian classical former Queen Square or Green Park railway station), we should emphasize a general contrast between the dynamism which normally characterized developments in British tourism during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and the lack of a leading British role in the European development of spa tourism, which appears anomalous in broader context. However, the comparative analysis of European inland spa resorts is complicated by the lack of shared vocabularies and systems of classification. In Spain and Portugal, for example, the dominant terminology speaks of ‘balnearios termales’ or ‘caldas’, while in Britain the word ‘spa’, taken from the name of the pioneering international resort of this type in what is now Belgium, has been applied to all non-coastal bathing resorts (and to medicinal springs in coastal settings, as at Scarborough and other places on the Yorkshire coast). This includes the cold baths and mineral springs which are particularly common in England, as well as the warm or hot mineral baths. Such ‘cold baths’ became fashionable in England following the publications of Sir John Floyer, beginning in the late seventeenth century¹⁵. The lack of shared vocabulary between English, Spanish and indeed other European languages presents problems for comparative history in this field. In British usage the revival of the use of the word ‘spa’ to denote a hotel that provides specialized bathing and massage services, with no association with local mineral springs, poses problems for internet searches and complicates matters further. Something similar has occurred with the word ‘therme’ in Germany.

It is interesting that we still lack a good general analytical history of English, and British, spas. Before the Second World War the English geographer E.W. Gilbert, who was also a pioneer of research into seaside towns, provided a brief introduction to the history of both kinds of health and pleasure resort¹⁶. The

¹³ Browne and Walton (2010); Walton and Wood (2009).

¹⁴ Borsay (2000); see also Moody (2004).

¹⁵ Jenner (1998); Joukes (2010).

¹⁶ Gilbert (1939).

first worthwhile historian of holidays in England, the senior civil servant J.A.R. Pimlott, also discussed aspects of the history of spas in his excellent book just after the war, but he was more interested in analyzing the growth of other kinds of holiday experience¹⁷. Since the 1960s there have been further contributions by geographers, especially J.A. Patmore, but never based on the depth of research that the subject really requires and deserves¹⁸. The best book-length study of the history of English spas from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century is that of Phyllis Hembry, which is basically descriptive but provides some useful evidence and interpretation. Unfortunately the successor volume, which was intended to continue the story, was published posthumously, and disastrously, with the help of friends, and turned out to be a disconnected mixture of anecdotal histories of particular places which lacked shape and academic rigour. The work of the journalist and popular writer E.S. Turner is more useful for the later period: it presents interesting arguments in an accessible style, but with no academic apparatus or pretensions¹⁹. It seems relevant to ask why British historians have shown so little interest in providing historical overviews of the spa phenomenon, despite the appearance of some excellent studies (as we shall see) of particular towns, especially the historic, imposing and important city of Bath.

3. The early decline of British spa resorts

Part of the explanation lies in the general decline of the comparative importance of English spas which set in during the second half of the nineteenth century. From the 1840s onwards, especially, the growing popularity of coastal tourism was eclipsing the spas, even though some of them, such as Leamington and Cheltenham, had not begun to grow rapidly until the early nineteenth century. They had benefited from the new wealth generated by the Industrial Revolution, and from the way in which the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars cut off access to European spa resorts (and to the Grand Tour) for most of the period between 1793 and 1815. But it was during this very period that Bath itself, the original fashionable English spa, had begun its transition from haunt of the aristocracy, a centre for dancing and lively sociability and a marriage market, to become a city of retired people and pensioners, especially retired military officers, while the medicinal use of its waters also fell into decline. We shall see that similar changes were to take place in other English cities of this kind²⁰. Peter Borsay has suggested that ‘the absence of an adequate overview of nineteenth-century British spas must leave the issue of general “decline” uncertain’²¹. This certainly applies to the nature, pace

¹⁷ Pimlott (1976), pp. 24-46, 51-57, 96-105, 184-185, and 256.

¹⁸ Patmore (1968); Harley (1979), pp. 290-292.

¹⁹ Hembry (1980); Hembry (1997); Turner (1967).

²⁰ Walton (1983), Chapters 2-3.

²¹ Borsay notes about the book of M.C. Neesam, *Harrogate Great Chronicle, 1332-1841*, in *English Historical Review*, 121, pp. 1549-1550.

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and extent of 'decline', which varied between places; but there can be no doubt about the long-term reality of the decline of practically all British spas as resorts, and especially as sites of medical tourism.

Explanations for the comparatively early decline of English spas have focused particularly on competition from seaside resorts, in a setting where access to the coast was relatively easy. Travel by sea was an important option before the railway age, down the Thames estuary from London by sailing vessel to Margate in the eighteenth century, and then by paddle steamer down the estuaries of the Thames, the Severn and (in Scotland) the Clyde. Established popular traditions of therapeutic and prophylactic sea-bathing were taken over and adapted by orthodox medicine as it established its professional hegemony from the early eighteenth century, and the spread of medicinal sea-bathing as a fashion in polite society brought new life to stagnating or declining fishing settlements which at first lacked conventional comforts and amenities. The 'invention of the sea' and of the coast as attractive locations, with the aesthetic and moral revaluation of maritime environments, had developed in England since the beginning of the eighteenth century, giving additional impetus to the fashion for cold salt-water bathing that the medical profession was promoting²². Seaside resorts offered their visitors a more open environment than the spas, with beaches and more extensive promenades: a more democratic setting, too, because British beaches were public places which resisted privatisation, not least because of problems of assigning ownership to the area between high and low tide. This posed problems for those who sought exclusivity, but allowed access to a wider public, keeping pace with growth in demand and allowing for the development of a broad array of profitable businesses. We should emphasize the almost complete absence of inland spas from the lists of destinations for excursion trains when the railways began to open out cheap travel. This entailed the exclusion of the working class from spa resorts, in contrast with their increasing (and at times controversial) numbers and visibility every summer week-end at all the popular beach resorts from the 1870s onwards, especially in the industrial north-west of England²³. In the whole of this increasingly populous region there were only two inland spas, neither of which had a fashionable clientele. Whittle Springs, near Chorley, in a coal mining district of Lancashire, was founded as late as 1846, when the seaside was already becoming popular, and attracted local people with gardens and public dancing; but it was unable to resist the competition of the popular seaside resorts of the Lancashire coast, and in 1883 its main mineral spring was lost. There was also a small spa catering for local people near Clitheroe, in the same county but on the edge of the industrial district; but by the time Dr Granville visited in 1840 as part of his survey of English spas and sea-bathing resorts, there was already a nearby cotton factory. Hembry's map of English spas before 1815 has two other small spas in Lancashire, as well as spa facilities in the larger towns of Liverpool and Wigan, but these did not continue

²² Brodie and Winter (2007).

²³ Walton (1981).

into the industrial era²⁴. The lack of spa resorts in these most prosperous and populous counties, the cradle of the world's first Industrial Revolution, is indicative of the limits to effective demand for the continuing development and popularisation of spa tourism in Britain²⁵.

The German system by which the State paid the cost of spa treatment for sick people with limited resources, with access to cheap lodgings, was not adopted in Britain, although there were occasional cases of poor patients being supported from local taxation before the nineteenth century, and Jane Adams has rediscovered the important role played by charitable 'voluntary' hospitals in accommodating and treating the poor in some spa towns during the nineteenth century²⁶. British inland spas neither wanted to attract or embrace the popular market, nor knew how to do so, and this helps to explain their stagnation when these were the growth areas in the leisure, health and tourism market. A further hypothesis, which complements the argument that seaside resorts were effective as competitors for inland spa custom, suggests that the managements of British spas were unable to match the attractions of their European counterparts. According to this interpretation the British model, which was dominated by independent, private and speculative businesses, was unable to sustain its competitiveness for the custom of wealthy Britons, especially against its German rivals. The German spas counted on the assistance (through regulatory systems and investment) of provincial and municipal governments in the development of state-managed capitalism, whose establishments exhibited the necessary capacity for attracting and keeping the patronage of European international elites, in terms both of treatments and of leisure facilities. British spas, like British coastal resorts, were never able to extend their reach beyond domestic markets²⁷.

For such reasons, perhaps, British spas were unable to generate positive publicity from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, and became practically invisible in the contemporary media. Particularly telling is the absence of British spa resorts from the pages of the humorous review *Punch*, and from similar publications, which until (and beyond) the Second World War were full of jokes and cartoons about British seaside holidays and resorts, but hardly ever mentioned spas, except during the vogue for 'hydrotherapy' involving cold showers and wet sheets which arrived in Britain from Gräfenberg (Silesia) in the early 1840s²⁸. This was an initiative by medical entrepreneurs who constructed specialized buildings for treatments that had nothing to do with mineral waters as such, although some were established in existing spa towns such as Matlock, with its 'Hydros' managed by John Smedley, and Malvern. The systems of treatment under such regimes, which practically amounted to a form of torture, involving very cold baths taken

²⁴ Jackson (n.d.); Granville (1971), Vol. 1, pp. 359-60; Hembry (1980), p. xi.

²⁵ Walton (1987).

²⁶ Adams (2006).

²⁷ Bacon (1997); Leonardi (2010).

²⁸ Durie (2006), pp. 2-4.

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in the small hours of the morning, provided ample opportunity for jokes and funny stories²⁹.

4. Geographical distribution and social change

Phyllis Hembry provides a map of English spa resorts before 1815, which shows 135 in all, including 17 in London, further concentrations in the Midlands and the southern counties, hardly any in East Anglia or in the north-west, and none at all in the south-western peninsula. These mineral springs were overwhelmingly small, rural and used entirely by local people, while many urban ones (as in London) were soon to be engulfed by urban growth; and this represents a much lower level of spa development than in France, Spain or Germany, especially as there were very few new foundations after 1815. Many of Hembry's spas were, indeed, ephemeral, and substantial commercial spa establishments in a rural setting, which were common in France and Spain, were very unusual here. Hembry lists eight major spas in capital letters (Bath, Epsom, Cheltenham, Leamington, Malvern, Harrogate, Buxton and Matlock), to which should be added Tunbridge Wells and the Clifton Hotwells at Bristol³⁰. We shall return to this list; but what stands out immediately is the paucity of commercial, urban spas in the England of the early nineteenth century, a situation which was to persist into and throughout the twentieth century.

Elsewhere in Great Britain spas were even thinner on the ground. Scotland had the three small spa settlements of Moffat, Bridge of Allan, and Strathpeffer, respectively in the south, centre and north of the country, together with the small planned spa resort of Pannanich (Ballater), and a dozen additional small establishments, mostly ephemeral. In Victorian times as many as 26 hydrotherapy centres ('Hydros') were opened, and this branch of the 'water cure' became a Scottish speciality from the 1870s onwards. But no Scottish spa was able to attract really large numbers of fashionable visitors, despite the efforts of the Highland Railway with its Strathpeffer Spa Express, a weekly summer through train whose advertising material was more impressive than the modest reality, although the branch line terminus was quite an impressive building. Moffat also had its own short branch railway, in this case off the London-Glasgow 'West Coast' main line³¹. Wales had only four spas with hotels and relevant services, all in the mountainous and underpopulated centre of the country, with very slow and circuitous access routes, even after the opening of a railway through the district in 1865. All these small resorts combined could only muster 5000 inhabitants at the 1911 census, when they were at their peak: as in Scotland, decline began inexorably after the First World War. There was also a small spa, without a hotel, at Trefriw, which could be reached by

²⁹ Hammerton (n.d.); Price (1981); Durie (2006a).

³⁰ Hembry (1980), p. xi.

³¹ Durie (2006a), pp. xii-xiii, p. 42; Durie (2003a), pp. 88-100; Durie (2003b), pp. 205-206; Durie (2006b); Hembry (1980), p. 213.

river steamer from the North Wales coastal resorts³². Meanwhile, effectively the only Irish spa resort developed from the 1870s in the south-west of the island, in the rustic village of Lisdoonvarna (County Clare), whose resident population has fluctuated between 700 and 800 inhabitants; but for many years the village has been better known as a September meeting-place for single people in search of marriage partners than for the health-giving qualities of its mineral springs³³.

The history of British spas thus becomes largely that of English ones; but even here there was nothing comparable to the extensive networks of relatively sophisticated spas that developed across much of Europe, especially in France, Spain, Germany and the countries of the Habsburg Empire³⁴. What is striking about England is the concentration of spa development into a handful of cities and towns of some local or regional importance, with resident populations at their peak (according to the decennial censuses) of between 10,000 and 80,000 people. All these towns began their modern spa careers between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth: Bath, Buxton, Matlock, Tunbridge Wells, Leamington Spa, Malvern, Cheltenham Spa and Harrogate, together with Epsom (which became a London suburb) and Clifton (which was part of Bristol). Each of these towns changed its economic and social structure during the nineteenth and twentieth century, moving away from specialization in spa tourism and becoming towns *with* spas, rather than 'spa towns'. None of them matched the rapid growth experienced by large numbers of English seaside resorts in the nineteenth and early twentieth century³⁵. There were also several dozen smaller spas, located in small towns and villages; but what was almost completely missing was the isolated rural spa, with its mineral spring, baths, hotel and gardens, remote from urban civilization. This kind of spa resort was common across most of Europe, but in England such places were a tiny minority, many with short lives and limited visibility: Shap Wells (which still exists), Thorpe Arch, Gilsland (which became a convalescent home), Whittle Springs, Willoughby, and perhaps Croft or Nottingham. England did not have isolated rural spa resorts like Panticosa in Spain, with fashionable status and extensive catchment areas for wealthy visitors: the smaller rural English spas were mainly for the lower middle class from the surrounding area³⁶.

The most important English inland spa towns, however, were larger than practically every European urban spa, with a few exceptions such as Wiesbaden or Vichy. The dominant theme is that they were less numerous, but included more substantial towns among their ranks, although through the nineteenth century they were increasingly outpaced and overshadowed by the rapidity and scale of urban growth at the seaside. Some, such as Bath, Clifton Hotwells and Tunbridge Wells, had begun their careers in the seventeenth century or earlier, and formed part of

³² Simmons (1986), pp. 253-254; Hembry (1997), p. 225; Phillips (2008).

³³ Furlong (2006); Drew (1996).

³⁴ Walton (2006); Steward (2000); Leonardi (2010).

³⁵ Walton (1983), Chapter 2; Walton (1997).

³⁶ Granville (1971); Monserrat Zapater (1991); Urkia (1998).

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the 'urban renaissance' of provincial English towns during the century after 1660. This phenomenon combined classical architecture, formal courtesy, the consumption of luxury goods, fashion and personal display, commercial leisure and polite sociability, in spaces shared by the aristocracy and the wealthy middle ranks. It constituted a key aspect of the expansion of demand that helped to fuel the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. Those spa towns which developed somewhat later, from the later eighteenth century, soon found it difficult to compete with the fashion for sea-bathing³⁷.

The growth of the spas, and indeed that of the seaside resorts, coincided with the first expansion and definition of the modern professions, including that of medicine, and the 'scientific revolution'. Spas and seaside resorts competed in the medical market place to attract consumers in search of improved health. The competitive search for evidence of the chemical composition of mineral waters began during the eighteenth century, although even in the middle of the nineteenth century some small spas preferred to advertise through stories of impressive individual cures, without paying heed to scientific analyses of their waters. In any case, different analyses of the same waters came up with contrasting results, which was not surprising given that it was seldom clear what was being analysed or how it was supposed to be labelled, classified and measured. Moreover, even when there was agreement about the chemical composition of the liquid, it was still difficult to be sure about how it might affect the human body. During the Victorian period the lack of public confidence in the quality of information about the medical market of the spas contributed to the growing competitive popularity of sea-bathing, which made no claim to cure specific kinds of illness, but to improve people's health in very general terms³⁸. As in other countries, the leading spa resorts soon reached beyond their original clientele of invalids and their families, providing assembly rooms, dancing and formal promenades and gardens. Roulette did not form part of the menu, as it did in some European spas: the gaming tables were banished from Bath in 1745, after an official crusade against excessive gambling, and did not return to any English watering-place until the beginning of the new millennium³⁹.

Perhaps the best approach to analysing the geographical distribution of English spa resorts is by using the impressive topographical survey by Dr A.B. Granville, first published in 1841⁴⁰. Granville, a medical doctor of Milanese origins (his father was Austrian, his mother English), took his doctorate in Paris and was well acquainted with the German spas. He made his tour of the watering-places of England (including seaside resorts and early hydrotherapy establishments) when the inland spas were at their peak, and also at the beginning of the development of the railway system, which he used with great pleasure and interest⁴¹. In this context

³⁷ Borsay (1989).

³⁸ Porter (1990); Jackson (n.d.), Coley (1982); Granville (1971), Vol. 2, p. 140 (Willoughby).

³⁹ Neale (1981), p. 28.

⁴⁰ Granville (1971).

⁴¹ Granville (1971), Vol. 1, pp. v-xxvi.

the lack of positive causal links between railways and inland spa development in England is interesting and perhaps surprising. By contrast, the influence of railways on seaside resort development was often considerable and even crucial, but it was not nearly as strong in the case of the spas, perhaps because the railways did not arrive until after the main period of spa development had already passed its peak⁴². Granville not only comment on the waters and their characteristics, but also on the social composition of the visitors, the entertainments, the attractions of the surrounding country, and the social life of the spas. He was unable to visit all the existing spas, but on the other hand he sometimes discovered new places with purely local visiting publics, which were hitherto unknown outside their immediate surroundings. Even so, it is clear that by this time England's spas were concentrated into the centre of the country, away from the industrial centres and picturesque landscapes of the North (with some exceptions in Yorkshire and the North-East), and with few surviving examples in the South, despite the importance of London as centre of wealth, leisure and consumer power. Perhaps the competitive specific gravity of Bath, Tunbridge Wells and Cheltenham, together with the early development of seaside resorts in an arc around the capital (Margate, Brighton, Weymouth), inhibited the growth of new spa resorts during the nineteenth century, as occurred in other regions. A reading of Granville shows that many medicinal waters in northern England occurred in mining districts where coal was a more lucrative business than mineral waters, and that in such locations the proliferation of industrial activities and working-class population concentrations around the spa resorts damaged the picturesque views and challenged the social tranquility which were necessary to attract wealthy visitors. Here we find an interesting contrast between England and France: in the latter country the most important spas tended to be concentrated in mountainous and peripheral regions, whereas almost all of the spa resorts in the northern hills of England were very small (for example Gilsland and Shap Wells). The only exceptions were Buxton and Matlock, in the Derbyshire Peak District, although Buxton was more bleak than picturesque. Malvern, in the West Midlands, and Cheltenham, on the edge of the Cotswolds, were also in picturesque hilly locations⁴³.

5. The value of individual case-studies

British historians have neglected the country's network of inland spas, as such; but there are many interesting studies of individual spas within the wider system. The city of Bath occupies the leading position, the outstanding works being that of Borsary on the evolution of the city's image and its ways of presenting itself to the outside world, and the Marxist interpretation by Neale, which emphasizes the importance of manufacturing to Bath's economy, with its radical working class

⁴² Simmons (1986), pp. 238-243.

⁴³ Walton (2006).

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and history of social conflict. Neale also lays stress on the workings of capitalism in Bath, through the investment of architects and speculators (especially the Wood family and the first Duke of Chandos), as the Georgian city was constructed as a source of profit as well as a thing of beauty. There are several other portraits of the city and its architecture, the organization of ‘high society’ to cope with the problems presented by the incipient democratization of the spa’s social institutions, the nature and regulation of medical provision, and the changes in the town’s social structure which became apparent in the early nineteenth century. We should indeed emphasize the limited extent of economic specialization in most English spa towns⁴⁴. But during the eighteenth century Bath became the leading health and pleasure resort in England, attracting wealthy ‘pilgrims’ in pursuit of health and ‘good society’ from all parts of the kingdom; but by the early nineteenth century this exalted status was passing to the seaside resort of Brighton.

After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 the rapid growth of London had stimulated the development of several popular spa resorts in its immediate surroundings, such as Hampstead and Epsom⁴⁵, but the only one to sustain the role of fashionable metropolitan resort was Tunbridge Wells, which challenged Bath’s pre-eminence for nearly a century without taking full advantage of its proximity to the capital⁴⁶. Closer to the wealthy Atlantic port of Bristol, the so-called ‘metropolis of the West’ in eighteenth-century England, the hot springs resort of Clifton Hotwells sustained a prosperous career over several decades, but more as a complement than a competitor to Bath, and finishing up as a fashionable suburb of Bristol itself⁴⁷. The coastal resort of Weymouth also shared customers with Bath at this time: as in the Basque Country a century later, some medical doctors suggested curative regimes that began by taking the waters at a spa and ended with a course of sea-bathing. As was the case with several other coastal resorts, Weymouth had mineral springs of its own in the neighbouring villages of Nottingham and Radipole. This was common on the east coast, where Scarborough attracted fashionable visitors to a mineral spring in the cliffs before the ‘discovery’ of sea-bathing changed its therapeutic orientation in the early eighteenth century⁴⁸. Scarborough, along with Harrogate and Buxton, was one of the first spa resorts of northern England. Each of them attracted aristocrats from the region alongside wealthy farmers, and the professionals, manufacturers and other businessmen who were proliferating in step with the commercial and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth century⁴⁹. Even so, the most dynamic spa resorts of the first half of the nineteenth century, the most explosive transitional period of urban and indus-

⁴⁴ Borsay (2000); Neale (1981); Davies and Bonsall (2006); Eglin (2005); McIntyre (1981); Chalklin (1974), pp. 74-80.

⁴⁵ Pimlott (1976), pp. 31-32; Thompson (1974), pp. 20-24.

⁴⁶ Melville (1912).

⁴⁷ Hussey (2011); Waite (1960).

⁴⁸ Binns (2001), pp. 93-104, 157-62, 242; Neave (2000).

⁴⁹ Jennings (1970); Walker (1986); Cannadine (1980), pp. 382-384.

trial growth, were Cheltenham⁵⁰ and Leamington⁵¹, close to the industrial districts that surrounded the great manufacturing centre of Birmingham, but at a substantial distance from the distinctive industrial areas of northern England (coal, iron, cotton, woollens), where seaside resorts dominated health and leisure tourism from an early stage.

England also contained health resorts which were sometimes called ‘spas’, not least in their own advertising, but which did not offer medicinal springs as such. An example is the small settlement of Church Stretton, near Shrewsbury, whose attractions consisted of pure and healthy air, a peaceful setting, and attractive hilly countryside⁵². Some hydropathic establishments in Scotland also called themselves ‘spas’, but in England most ‘Hydros’ were located in or close to established spa settlements, as at Malvern (another place which ‘sold itself’ on the quality of its pure air and waters)⁵³, or Matlock, or, for example, Ben Rhydding, two kilometres from the small spa town of Ilkley in West Yorkshire⁵⁴.

6. The distinctive nature of the British experience

It seems clear that the system or network of spa resorts that developed in the United Kingdom during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was different from those of other European countries, more complicated, and less dynamic, failing to match the leading role which Britain had played in the development of most other aspects of national and international tourism during this period. Bath’s dominant position over many years, the disproportionate importance of a small group of inland spa towns, and the early and sustained competition from the coastal resorts all made their contributions to a distinctive panorama. We might also suggest that the decline of British spa resorts, as such, began earlier than on the European mainland. There is as yet little research on this theme, however, and we should take account of a new research project at the University of Warwick, which argues that significant innovations were taking place in the treatments offered by English spas during the first half of the twentieth century, and thereby complicates existing assumptions. Debate is beginning and will continue. Even so, towards the end of the nineteenth century it was already obvious that not only Bath, but also (for example) Cheltenham, Leamington and Harrogate were becoming residential and commercial cities with large affluent retired populations (drawn especially from the officer class of the British armed forces). They were also developing private schools for the sons and daughters of parents who lived and worked outside Britain, and populations of commuters who travelled, at first by train, to and from

⁵⁰ Hart (1965); Jones (2010).

⁵¹ Lloyd (1977).

⁵² Beckerson and Walton (2005).

⁵³ Smith (1964).

⁵⁴ Price (1981); Durie (2006a).

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work in nearby industrial and commercial centres: from Harrogate or Ilkley to Leeds or Bradford, from Buxton to Manchester...). The largest and most prosperous inland spas had turned into cities whose mineral springs formed part of their overall identity, but an economically subordinate one, while many regional and local spas fell into decline. Such trajectories continued during the twentieth century. The case of Harrogate towards the end of the millennium is representative of the more successful outcomes. It became a centre of consumption, with high-quality specialist shops; a conference centre, with appropriate municipal investment in new facilities; a residential centre and meeting place for the wealthy bourgeoisie of northern England; and also, alongside all this, a spa resort, an aspect of its identity which was more important as an eminently marketable part of the city's heritage than for its current direct contribution to the urban economy⁵⁵.

We can conclude by stating confidently that the trajectory of spa tourism in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period of enormous economic and social changes, was different from the prevailing patterns across the rest of Europe. Above all, in this field the British did not demonstrate or sustain the capacity for innovation and dynamism that was notable in other aspects of the development of tourism at this time. There were exceptions, most prominently the development of eighteenth-century Bath or of Cheltenham in the early nineteenth century. Still, even the most impressive British spa resorts were unable to compete effectively with their European rivals at the top end of the international market, or with the developing seaside resorts at a national level. Even before the end of the nineteenth century, and in Bath's case much earlier, they were becoming retirement and commuter centres for the entrepreneurial, professional and salaried middle classes of nearby industrial cities and regional capitals. This was a genuinely distinctive pattern of development, which deserves fuller treatment at national level (especially for the twentieth century) than British historians have so far been willing to provide.

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⁵⁵ Cuthill (2004).

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