

Harrogate Heritage

Looking back: calls to bring back Harrogate's lovely Fountain Court

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It will be a pity if the county council's rejection of the idea of improving Parliament Street, by means of diverting West Park's vehicular traffic down Montpellier Hill, causes the Lateral Property Group to abandon its proposals to work for the improvement of that street and its hinterland.

If my memory is correct, I recall their proposals included several welcome measures, such as improving street furniture, better shop fronts, façade enhancement, and further attractions for visitors – all things which in my view would increase visitor footfall in a very important commercial area of the town.

But the area is also an important locality from the historical and architectural points of view, so it would surely be unreasonable and counter productive to propose changes which would degrade the very things which currently attract visitors in such high numbers.

Back in the 1930s, Harrogate was still a working spa. In fact it was the most successful spa in the British Empire, and one of the most famous spas in the world. Nevertheless, the council was worried by the decline of British spas generally.

In 1931, at the height of a dreadful depression, Harrogate Council began to talk about improvement programmes that would retain existing business and encourage more visitors.

A three-part plan for Valley Gardens was adopted, the first phase of which was the opening of the Sun Colonnade and Pavilion in 1933

For almost twenty years from 1995, the eminent local historian Malcolm Neesam contributed a series of remarkable articles to the Advertiser, initially under the headline 'Bygone Harrogate' and later using the title 'Our Heritage'. In association with Harrogate Civic Society, we are proud to republish a selection from the series. The views expressed were those of the late Mr Neesam at the time of writing and do not necessarily reflect the current view of the Advertiser or Harrogate Civic Society.

by Lord Horder, personal physician to the Prince of Wales.

Unfortunately, the council also instituted a major battle with the ratepayers when they took large parts of West Park Stray for flower beds, an action that led to the councillors who had supported the desecration being turned out of office at the municipal elections.

This resulted in the one-issue new council abandoning the later phases of the Valley Gardens improvement plan.

For a few years, the town drifted, but following tours of European spas in 1935 and 1936, a new plan was developed, which concentrated improvements away from Valley Dens to the Royal Baths site between Parlia-

ment Street and the Crown Hotel.

The Harrogate Herald published the first details of the new plan on October 20, 1936, advising readers that the finance committee had approved a £66,000 scheme to demolish two-thirds of the Wintergarden and to replace it with a new treatment block, a lounge hall, and an open air Fountain Court.

The treatment block would be on two main levels with a lift, and was intended to receive all the treatments requiring the application of the town's unique mineral waters, such as the sulphur water baths and the inhalation equipment.

On the site of the old Wintergarden a new assembly hall would provide accommodation for patients who wished to relax after treatments.

The new hall would be separated from the treatment block by a square, colonnaded Fountain Court, which was to have a glazed roof round its edges, and a central open air area with a fountain.

The whole development was opened in great pomp by the Lord Mayor of London on July 10, 1939, and was the United Kingdom's biggest and most important example of spa development



The Lord Mayor of London opening Fountain Court in 1939.

of the inter-war years.

It was this latter fact, together with the fine art-deco fittings, that led to it being listed in the 1980s. From the general public's point, the new treatment block may have had no attraction, but the Lounge Hall and Fountain Court rapidly became popular town centre venues.

The Lounge Hall, which measured 80 feet by 60 feet, being lined with superb birds eye maple panels, could accommodate between 500-600 people, and was used for coffee mornings, fashion shows, antique exhibitions, school speech days, mayor makings, concerts and recitals.

A perfect arena for civic use, of exactly the sort that is today so sorely missed after it was allowed to be tak-

en over by Wetherspoons.

Ah! but the Fountain Court; there was something special indeed. It was a square courtyard open to the sky, and fringed on all four sides with a handsome colonnade of columns in the Tuscan order, which supported a glazed roof joined to the sides of the courtyard.

At the centre was a circular pond, filled with goldfish and a fountain. During French and Italian weeks in the 1950s and 1960s, colourful sun umbrellas were provided, turning the Fountain Court in to a mini Aix-les-Bains or Montecatini.

Alas, by the 1980s, wanton neglect had brought the whole Royal Baths into a sorry state of decay. The treatment block was so badly neglected by the council that when I last saw it, trees

were growing inside the upper floors.

The Fountain Court was a dump for unwanted furniture and equipment from the rest of the building, and the Lounge Hall was shabby and stained.

But the real problem was that the councillors no longer saw the Royal Baths as an asset, but as a problem, and as we all know, the best thing to do with a problem is to be rid of it, which was why – after an ineffectual marketing campaign – the council leased the whole site to Scottish Life for the preposterously long period of 150 years!

A development brief was drawn up which paid great attention to maintaining such things as the mature trees, the historic mineral springs, and the spa heritage.

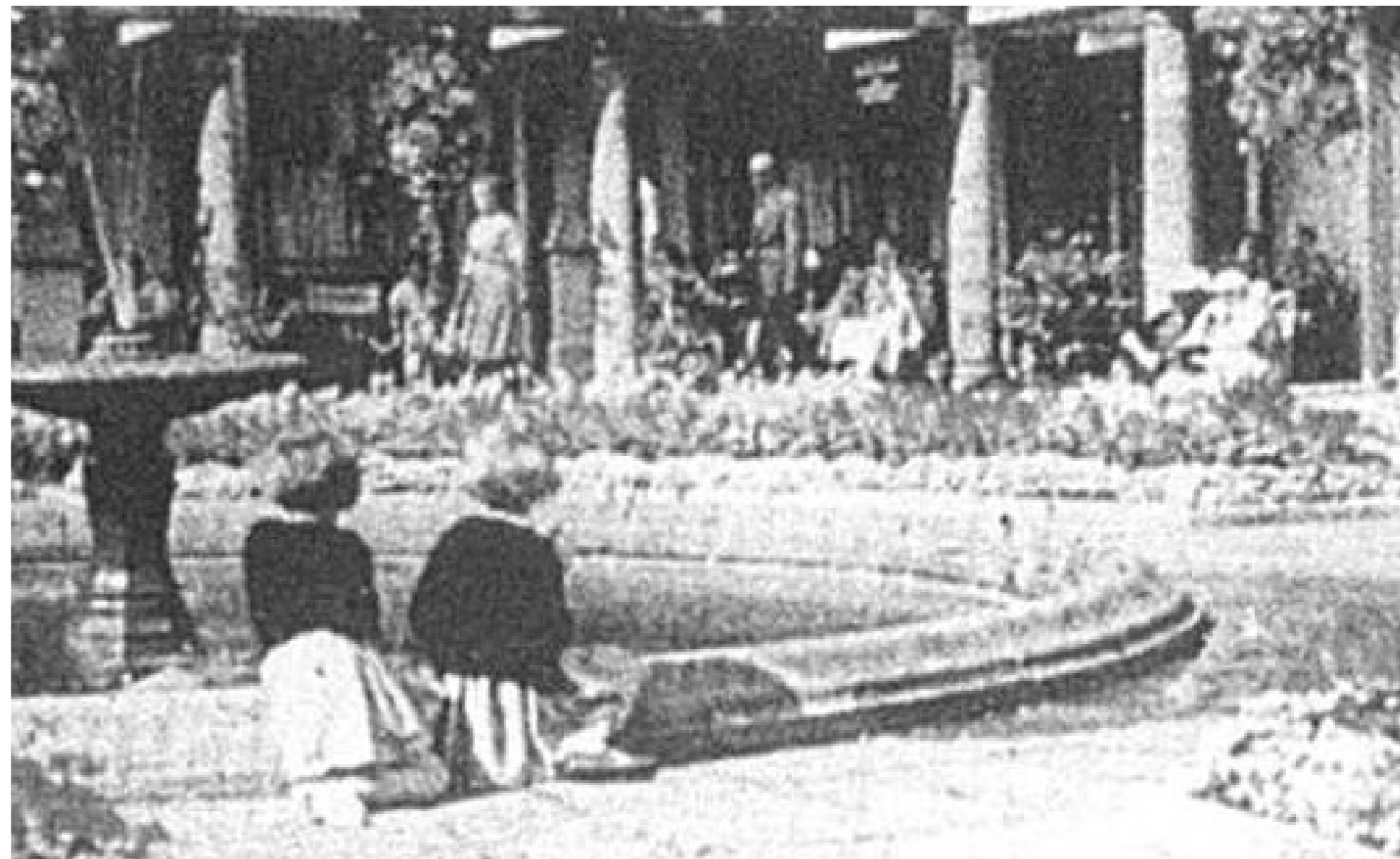
It wasn't worth the paper it was printed on.

The trees were felled, the mineral springs destroyed by the foundations of the new apartment block, and, despite protests from the British Spas Federation, the Society for Twentieth Century Architecture, and Harrogate Civic Society, the treatment block was torn down in February 2001, and the Fountain Court demolished to provide the surface car park with only nine additional spaces.

After various changes of ownership, I understand that the current leaseholder of the Royal Baths site is the Lateral Property Group referred to at the start of this article, the main point of which I will now outline.

Lateral's published plan "Harrogate Vision" shows that the company control the site of the Fountain Court (named as site four).

This same plan also shows that the company



Above: A picture of Fountain Court from 1965. Below: Fountain Court in 1958.

proposes the construction of two large buildings on the site of the old Fountain Court and the current Wetherspoons car park.

Let the walls be of stone, and the facades harmonise with the surrounding Victorian buildings using the language of traditional Harrogate architecture.

Above all, as it is within Lateral's power to restore the Fountain Court, let them do so.

Such a feature could be surrounded by four levels of retail space, overlooking the Fountain Court like the balconies of a galleried coaching inn.

A glazed roof would ensure the space could be used throughout the year.

What do readers think? This article was first published on July 12, 2012.

A note from Harrogate Civic Society: It is now more than two years since Malcolm's death. He left behind an astonishing body of work that we at the Harrogate Civic Society are

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determined should be preserved and enhanced for the benefit of future historians and, indeed, for the benefit of anyone who cares about Harrogate.

Not long before his passing, we discussed with Malcolm and the Advertiser republishing at least some of his articles.

Many of Malcolm's articles dealt with the history of the town, exploring the people, places and events that helped to form the Harrogate we know today. At other

times Malcolm concentrated more on contemporary issues.

While acknowledging that Harrogate could not stand still, he was convinced that change should always be tested.

In September, the first re-publication of Mr Neesam's articles appeared and this today continues the series.

We are grateful to Malcolm's family for their approval, to Simon Kent (closely involved with securing Malcolm's legacy) for his work researching and preparing the articles for reprint, for the advice of historian Paul Jennings and to Graham Chalmers and his team at the Advertiser for their support and encouragement.

We hope you will enjoy reading (or in some cases re-reading) these irreplaceable snapshots of history.

If you are able to add to our knowledge, or wish to know more about our work, contact us at: history@harrogatecivicsociety.org.

