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Getting away or getting connected

German and English Spa-Cultures in the 19th Century

Throughout their existence, spa towns had, besides their medical function, a reputation as centres of social gathering. Their long history saw periods of increasing and decreasing popularity, but these were never solely dependent on the belief in the waters' healing powers. Rather, they were linked to complex social, cultural and political circumstances. The spa seasons, usually lasting for little more than the three summer months, were condensed periods which functioned simultaneously as times of leisure and social business. The forms of social interaction they produced presupposed seclusion on the one hand and connectedness on the other. Moreover, spas had always been situated "within a web of interconnected medical, philosophical, aesthetic, social and religious discourses".¹ Indeed, they were intensely bound up with all the major transformative processes that constitute European social history. Obvious historical milestones in the 19th century include the Carlsbad Decrees and the Ems Dispatch, or the *Kaisertreffen* in various European spas. But the importance of these places goes far beyond, or rather, lies beneath such political occasions and is bound up with a wide spectrum of social, economic and cultural developments. Spas "display facets of the fluctuating, interactive confluences of people, cultural discourses and marketing practices that comprise modern Europe",² and played a significant role in the transformation of European society that took place in the course of the 19th century. The processes involved, however, were different in different places, and this too is reflected in spa culture. This paper takes as axiomatic that "there is no single European concept of recreational water"³ and will focus on early to mid-19th century British and German spa places, comparing and contrasting the functions they took on, and the developments they underwent, within their respective contexts. I am particularly concerned with the period before 1871, i.e. the time when Germany was not yet a single state, did not have one capital, and was also lagging behind Britain in terms of its economic and industrial development, yet, was beginning to show signs of the above-mentioned processes of modernization.

1 Susan C. Anderson and Bruce Tabb (eds.), *Water, Leisure & Culture: European Historical Perspectives*. (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002), 3.

2 Anderson and Tabb, *Water, Leisure & Culture*, 6.

3 Anderson and Tabb, *Water, Leisure & Culture*, 5.

The 18th century had brought some substantial changes to spa procedures across Europe, owing inter alia to a change in medical opinion: The external use of the waters (bathing, steam-bathing, douche, mud-packs etc.) was, from the mid-17-hundreds onwards, increasingly (though never completely) replaced by their internal use: drinking.⁴ Not only did drinking the waters take far fewer hours per patient and day, it was also part of a larger dietetic regime and meant to be combined with mild physical exercise such as walking and with pleasant collective activities such as conversing. In short, the patients had, by way of medical prescription, been invited to be sociable, and the new medical procedures paved the way for a new spa culture.

Responding to this, and particularly from the second half of the 18th century onwards, spa places throughout Europe underwent some dramatic transformations in terms of their infrastructure, their scale, their social setup and indeed their image. Looking at the histories of individual spas, we can see that they were either newly created (as demand grew) or drastically re-shaped and extended in the late 18th to the mid-19th century. Huge investments were made either by private companies or by municipal governments. In the course of this process, a distinctive, transnational spa architecture emerged, and institutions such as the modern hotel were developed. This applies to the Belgium town of Spa, which owes much of its current appearance to its development in the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as to the English town of Bath, the Bohemian Carlsbad or the German Bad Pyrmont. About Bath, for instance, we read:

The first set of purpose-built assembly rooms was opened in 1708, a second set was added in 1730, and a new and grander establishment was opened in Lansdowne in 1771 to service the rapid extra-mural growth of the city to the north. Formally laid out public walks had been present in the spa since at least the late 17th century, and these were themselves improved and added to by further promenades and commercial pleasure gardens. [...] Assembly rooms and pleasure gardens were not only used to walk and dance in, they also accommodated a wide range of other public recreations including theatre, concerts, gaming, lectures, and a particularly social form of commensality, the public breakfast.⁵

⁴ Underlying this change were discussions by medics about the permeability of the human skin – and hence the effectiveness of external use – as well as the discovery of a number of carbonated springs the consumption of which appeared to have a positive effect on patients with digestive problems. See: Irmgard Probst, *Die Balneologie des 16. Jahrhunderts im Spiegel der deutschen Badeschriften* (Münster: Institut für Geschichte der Medizin der Universität Münster, 1971).

⁵ Peter Borsay, *The Image of Georgian Bath, 1700–2000: Towns, Heritage, and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6f.

Carlsbad's restructuring and building boom started in the 1770s and followed similar lines, and Pyrmont had developed its characteristic network of promenades and gardens from 1767 onwards. Moreover, the internal, urban infrastructure of these towns was surrounded by carefully (re-)designed spa landscapes. Pleasant walk ways and riding paths led to sights of extraordinary natural beauty, to artificial attractions such as monuments or to panorama points, with shelters in the shape of small temples, hermitages etc., carefully placed along the way.

The spa town as a distinctive type of urban settlement⁶ owes its existence mainly to these transformative processes. As spas increasingly combined their function as health providers with that of holiday destinations, they can be regarded as precursors to the modern tourist resort – long before the advent of mass tourism. Anderson and Tabb are right in asserting that “[d]espite centuries of spa use [...] modern spas were not merely a continuation of an unbroken tradition. They were a phenomenon related more closely to Enlightenment ideas and changes in the marketplace.”⁷ It almost goes without saying that in the 19th century, the creation of national and European rail networks had a crucial impact on the further development of  towns.

By around 1800, the annual visit of a spa had become an integral part of the calendars of many European aristocrats and members of the upper bourgeoisie. They toured the fashionable spas such as Bath in England, Spa in Belgium, Lucca in Italy, Vichy in France, Baden-Baden in Germany, Carlsbad in the Habsburg Empire etc. The middle classes, too, had started to travel to spas on a more or less regular basis. A trip there combined recreation and leisure with a change of scene, closeness to nature and yet all the amenities needed for a comfortable life. As David Blackburn points out:

The spa reproduced an urban way of life in a rural setting: theatre, reading room, luxury shops, coffee house. Here, in concentrated form, was the ‘world of goods’ and a place where civilized ideas could be exchanged. [...] it offered the satisfactions of urbanity to a growing public that wanted to consume and converse as well as take the cure.⁸

⁶ Spa towns are shaped by their one dominant function and as such comparable to other special urban settlements such as fortress towns or garrison towns. Borsay thus calls them “service towns par excellence”. Borsay, *Georgian Bath*, 11.

⁷ Anderson and Tabb, *Water, Leisure & Culture*, 3.

⁸ David Blackburn, “Fashionable Spa Towns in 19th Century Europe,” in *Water, Leisure & Culture*, eds. Anderson and Tabb, 9–21, here: 12.

Besides, they facilitated “gatherings, which presented new and unique opportunities for informal social intercourse, the exchange of political and religious information, intrigue and gossip”.⁹

Across Europe, we find similar physical features in these towns as mentioned above: the public walks, the possibility of having meals in large groups and – weather permitting – in the open air, the concert pavilions, theatres, casinos, and sports fields. Sociability was central to life in all of them;¹⁰ in many a European spa, gambling became a serious pastime,¹¹ and equally many of them served as marriage markets. The “sommerliche Interaktionskultur”¹² emerging in these towns was grounded in the medically sanctioned sociability (as sketched out above) and shaped by the diverse backgrounds of their visitors and the temporariness of their stay. Thus, spas accommodated a remarkable complexity of social and cultural encounters and achieved a veritable *co-incidentia oppositorum*. They were spaces of illness and health, of rest and activity, of rural and of urban infrastructure, of confinement and of display, of withdrawal from, and heightened experience of, social life. This ‘instability of social configuration’, as Alexa Geisthövel sees it, had the potential to provoke a wide spectrum of reactions by different sections of the respective spa society: from an acceptance of the – possibly extraordinary – social mixing to special efforts to avoid it.¹³

Looking at German and English spas from this perspective, they almost seem to occupy opposite ends of this spectrum. When the English doctor James Johnson toured a number of German spas in the 1830s, one of his most striking social observations was that

The company which [...] daily assembles for dinner, is of the most heterogeneous description, being composed of princes, dukes, barons, counts & co, down to the petty shop-keeper and even the Jew of Frankfort, Mainz, and other neighbouring towns; in short, all the most

9 Phyllis Hembry, *The English Spa 1560–1815: A Social History* (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 9.

10 Peter Borsay calls Bath Britain’s “engine of sociability”. Borsay, *Georgian Bath*, 8.

11 Some spas, such as the Bohemian Carlsbad, Marienbad and Teplitz explicitly forbade gambling, but many others built their wealth and some of their fame on it.

12 Alexa Geisthövel, „Promenadenmischungen: Raum und Kommunikation in Hydropolen 1830–1880,“ in *Ortsgespräche: Raum und Kommunikation im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Alexander Geppert, Ulla Jensen and Jörn Weichold (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005), 203–229, here: 203.

13 „Die Notwendigkeit, sich tagtäglich zu mischen, konnte eine größere Akzeptanz solcher Überschreitungen bewirken, andererseits aber auch nach gesteigerten Distinktionsanstrengungen verlangen.“ Geisthövel, „Promenadenmischungen,“ 209. She also talks about „Mischungslüste“ vs. „Mischungssängste“, 228.

jarring elements of society, at the same moment, enter the same room, to partake together, the same one shilling and eight-penny dinner.¹⁴

Putting together a number of such observations, he concludes that

There are few places where a stranger can have a better coup-d'oeil of German habits and manners, than at the SPAS; where all ranks and classes, from the prince to the peasant, are jumbled together, without ever jostling each other. They drink together, bathe together, walk together, talk together, smoke together, joke together, dine together, muse together, sup together and, then go to bed, all with the greatest decorum, quietude, civility and I may add, ceremony.¹⁵

The reason for Johnson's, and other Englishmen's astonishment was of course the striking difference to the experience in their native spas, "where each class forms a clique that repels its neighbour as one electrified ball repels another."¹⁶ It is safe to say that there is some exaggeration in the descriptions (i.e. the 'prince to peasant' image), and that this was certainly not representative of 'German manners' as such. However, the uncommonly strong social mix was indeed representative of spa life in most German speaking resorts. It was accompanied inter alia by a confessional and a national mix of the spa guests and created, in these provincial backwaters, what Burkhard Fuhs calls a "sozialer Kompromißraum"¹⁷: For a limited period of time per year, the spa environment offered its guests the opportunity to escape their everyday restrictions, to experiment, if they wished, with different life styles, political opinions, artistic tastes etc., and to make acquaintances and form alliances that were not otherwise possible. After one or two months, however, they would return from the spa and were again free to either discard all of this, or to incorporate at least some changes into their lives and

14 James Johnson, *Pilgrimages to the Spas in Pursuit of Health and Recreation with an Inquiry into the Merits of different Mineral Waters* (London: S. Highley, 1841), 87. He stresses that this is not restricted to selected spas but "everywhere the same," and we can find similar observations in other contemporary as well as historiographical accounts. See for instance Ewald Hiebl's paper „Bürger, Bauer, Edelmann. Sozialgeschichtliche Aspekte zum Salzburger Bäderwesen im langen 19. Jahrhundert“ at the Jahrestagung *Geschichte(n) von Gesundheit und Krankheit des Vereins für Sozialgeschichte der Medizin in Österreich*, presented on 27 April 2014. With reference to Bad Gastein he described the habit of seating new arrivals at the foot of the table irrespective of their rank.

15 Johnson, *Pilgrimages to the Spas*, 86.

16 Johnson, *Pilgrimages to the Spas*, 87.

17 Burkhard Fuhs, *Mondäne Orte einer vornehmen Gesellschaft: Kultur und Geschichte der Kurstädte 1700–1900* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1992), 227.

doings back home. As places of heightened communication and of social and cultural experiment, spa towns facilitated something like a temporary metropolitan atmosphere.¹⁸ This was particularly pertinent in a country that not only did not yet exist as a national state with a centralised power, but was distinctly lacking a central metropolis such as London. (For even Munich or Hamburg or Berlin bore no comparison to London or Paris in this respect.) The term ‘hydropolis’ that Geisthövel attributes to these spas, might indicate in some measure the comparability in function.¹⁹

The British Isles on the other hand had London as the metropolis per se, and it certainly did not need any backup from some pretty backwaters. Examining the spa societies in Bath, Cheltenham and elsewhere, we see much more of the opposite reaction to the potentially unstable configuration of the spa: special efforts at social distinction. Looking at descriptions of Bath from the early 19th century, we learn that although the social exclusiveness of the resort had started to crumble, the prestige of the upper classes remained “protected by the creation of a series of select clubs and social gatherings that were in effect status-safe zones”.²⁰ These zones were defined not only socially, but spatially. Keiko Parker points out a “special topographic feature” of the expanding town: “that as one goes north one goes upward, [and] that ‘upward’ is not just physical, but social”.²¹ She then identifies the different locations of the various characters of Jane Austen’s novel *Persuasion* (1817) in Bath and concludes that its topography is “closely integrated with the characters’ rank and situation in life. [...] The entire city becomes a metaphor for the society she portrays.”²² Peter Borsay’s comments on the physical coherence of Bath’s architecture “in which individual dwellings were subsumed beneath a larger structure”²³ confirm this claim.

Another important feature of the English spas were their *Masters of the Ceremonies*. These men regulated social life in that they determined the rules of access and etiquette pertaining to all public events. About Cheltenham’s first Master of Ceremonies (who also published *A Tour to Cheltenham Spa* in 1788) we read that

18 In this respect spa towns were comparable to other sociable institutions such as the European Salon (which had its heyday around 1800).

19 See Geisthövel, „Promenadenmischungen.“

20 Borsay, *Georgian Bath*, 10f.

21 Keiko Parker: “‘What part of Bath do you think they will settle in?’: Jane Austen’s use of Bath in *Persuasion*,” in *Persuasions* 32 (2001), 166–176, here: 168.

22 Parker, “Jane Austen’s use of Bath,” 169.

23 Borsay, *Georgian Bath*, 8.

For some years, owing to ill-health, Moreau had become rather slack, and had allowed rules and regulations to be disregarded, so that his successor [...] found that indecorum had sometimes stepped in, and he had a hard task to pull the social life of the town together, and to secure a willing recognition of his authority.²⁴

The Master of Ceremonies was a well-paid position often given to former army officers. The social importance ascribed to such an institution, and the ritualization of social behaviour in Cheltenham Spa become even clearer in the description of the 1835 initiation of one of Moreau's successors:

On Thursday evening last, Captain Kirwan was received at the entrance of the Promenade Room by the Earl of Moray and Mr Jearrad [...] by whom he was conducted to Lady Burdett, who, surrounded by the Lady Patronesses, was seated on a raised dais, which had been erected for the occasion. Her ladyship in receiving Captain Kirwan, addressed him in a brief but appropriate congratulatory speech, after which he was invested with the Blue Ribbon. Captain Kirwan in his reply acknowledged the honour which had been conferred upon him after which the proceedings were closed with a flourish of trumpets, and the Band played the National Anthem.²⁵

Whilst much of the social life in the English spas took place in closed rooms – the pump room, the promenade room – in the German spas we find the open-air promenade to be the most important space. And life there was far less regulated, even than it was in the closed rooms the promenade linked together. “Auf der Brunnenpromenade”, the *Conversationsblatt für die Taunusbäder* (6 August 1845) declared, „kannst du dich den höchsten anwesenden Personen, die daheim nicht empfangen, ohne Ceremoniel nähern und wirst freundlich angenommen.“²⁶ (And if these highest persons present did not like this, they might have resorted to fleeing from the promenade into the woods, as the Austrian Empress Elisabeth did in 1865 in Kissingen.²⁷) Adding in the notion of constant movement,

²⁴ Edith Humphris and Captain E.C. Willoughby, *Georgian Cheltenham* (first published in 1928, reprint: Stroud: The History Press, 2008), 82.

²⁵ Quoted in Humphris and Willoughby, *Georgian Cheltenham*, 203. Of Kirwan's time as Master of the Ceremonies we read: “He held the office of MC for thirty-seven years, only resigning shortly before his death. No successor to him was appointed, and with his death the last link with the old Georgian days was broken.”, 203.

²⁶ Quoted in Geisthövel, „Promenadenmischungen,“ 222.

²⁷ See Geisthövel, „Promenadenmischungen,“ 226.

it is quite fitting that Geisthövel compares the promenade of the spa town, or rather, the culture of interaction prevalent there, with that of the metropolitan boulevard.²⁸

Another observation Dr Johnson made on his German tour was that most of the spas he visited had an international society of visitors.²⁹ This again, was not the same in England. The city of Bath was a “truly national attraction”³⁰ and filled with mainly English, Scottish, and some Irish upper-class visitors. Cheltenham prided itself on hosting some “foreign *noblesse*”³¹, namely representatives of the French Royal family who had managed to escape the *terreur* of the French revolution and emigrate. But the fact that this is worthy of note marks it out as the exception. Baden-Baden, on the other hand, was called the summer capital of Europe (“Europas Sommerhauptstadt”³²), and the smaller German spas, too, had guests from abroad; some from further away, but most from other European countries. Indeed, even Cheltenham lost some of its native regulars to continental spas once the Napoleonic Wars were over and the Continental Blockade lifted. For the then still tiny Black Forest resort of Wildbad, Johnson reports 10 English visitors alone for 1837, 130 for 1838 and “[i]n 1839, about the middle of August, when I was there, the number had still increased.”³³

Moreover, within the context of English spas, there was a clear hierarchy with Bath as the front-runner. According to Jon Stobard, it “overshadowed all the other 18th century resorts. Early in the century, there were 8,000 visitors per annum; by 1749 this had grown to 12,000, and in 1800 there were 40,000.”³⁴ But it is not only the number of visitors but their social standing that is of relevance here:

The royal and aristocratic connection, begun by Elizabeth I, in 1574, and strengthened in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, may have been waning from the 1750s, but the town

28 She does so with reference to David Scobey’s study “Anatomy of the Promenade: The Politics of Bourgeois Sociability in Nineteenth-Century New York,” in *Social History* 17 (1992), 203–227.

29 See for instance Johnson, *Pilgrimages to the Spas*, 81, 104, 129, 134, 257.

30 Jon Stobard, “In Search of a Leisure Hierarchy: English Spa Towns and their Place in the 18th Century Urban System,” in *New Directions in Urban History: Aspects in European Art, Health, Tourism and Leisure since the Enlightenment*, eds. Peter Borsay, Gunther Hirschfelder and Ruth E. Mohrmann (Münster: Waxmann, 2000) 19–40, here: 20.

31 Quoted in Humphris and Willoughby, *Georgian Cheltenham*, 135.

32 See Geisthövel, “Promenadenmischungen,” 205.

33 Johnson, *Pilgrimages to the Spas*, 105.

34 Stobard, “In Search of a Leisure Hierarchy,” 23.

could still attract 148 people of quality in 1765, including three princes, four dukes, twenty-four earls, forty-three viscountesses and six bishops.³⁵

The society in Bath around 1800, and the public sphere that it formed, was an exclusive one, that of the country's social elite. Within England's

leisure hierarchy for the 18th century [...] Bath was operating on a different level from the other towns: it set trends, offered more choice in almost every aspect of leisure [...]. One level down, Cheltenham, Bristol and perhaps Chester appear to have been broadly similar in terms of the range and number of their leisure facilities, [...]. Distinctions lower down this hierarchy are less clear.³⁶

Second-tier places like Cheltenham co-ordinated with, and copied Bath to a large extent, even down to its architectural landmark, the Crescent.³⁷ It, too, claimed strong Royal ties and could pride itself in accommodating members of the Royal family for several years and thus temporarily turning into a site of the Royal Court.³⁸ In the German speaking world at the time, there was much less of a hierarchy among the spas. Some had the reputation of being more glamorous than others, but between them, they seemed to take turns at being the most fashionable place for a year or two (*Die Krone der Bäder*). As in England, there was some social distinction among the spas as far as the standing of their main clientele was concerned, but unlike British ones, all the German spas accommodated a social mix.

Another significant difference can be found in the emerging demographics of English and German spas. Places like Bath and Cheltenham accommodated increasing numbers of permanent inhabitants. Although they maintained some notion of the spa season ("Bath was a winter and Cheltenham a summer resort"³⁹) they were developing into "considerable residential town[s], and throughout the year there was scarcely ever any diminution of the fashionable company"⁴⁰ which to some extent consisted of those people of rank and of money who had

35 Stobard, "In Search of a Leisure Hierachy," 23.

36 Stobard, "In Search of a Leisure Hierachy," 20. Already in the 1720s, it was apparent to Defoe that "as the nobility and gentry go to Tunbridge, the merchants and rich citizens to Epsome; so the common people go chiefly to Dulwich and Streatham." Stobart quoting Defoe, *Tour through Great Britain*.

37 The Royal Crescent in Bath was built between 1767 and 1774, and the Royal Crescent in Cheltenham between 1806 and 1810.

38 See for instance: Humphris and Willoughby, *Georgian Cheltenham*, where detailed descriptions of the visits of George III and George IV can be found.

39 Humphris and Willoughby, *Georgian Cheltenham*, 146.

40 Humphris and Willoughby, *Georgian Cheltenham*, 146.

made these spas their preferred place of retirement. As a consequence, Bath grew in

the course of the 18th century from a smallish country town of 2,000 to 3,000 inhabitants to a city of 33,000 people – about the tenth largest town in England and Wales. [...] So great was the change, that excepting the metropolitan capitals of London, Dublin and Edinburgh, it is unlikely that any other city in Britain could challenge Bath as a centre of élite cultural life.⁴¹

Conversely, by maintaining the notion of the spa season, German spas also maintained the small numbers of permanent residents, increasing only their numbers of summer guests from year to year. By the time Bath had 33,000 inhabitants, for instance, Baden-Baden still had 3000, yet accommodated 46,842 visitors in the summer of 1860.⁴² Thus, they remained provincial places, alternating their existence as sleepy backwaters in the winter months with a super-busy, quasi-metropolitan life in the summers.

Thus, we can see comparable success stories of the spas in Britain and Germany around 1800 and over the 19th century, yet we also note some significant differences: seasonal versus permanent growth (which in consequence results in province versus city); international versus national character; and social mix versus social segregation. In both national contexts, however, they were “part of a much broader network of complementary and competing urban centres”,⁴³ taking their specific place within these networks. In particular, it seems to me, they need to be seen in relation to the capital (or lack thereof). While German spa towns offered a temporary substitute for the missing cosmopolitanism, heterogeneity and social dynamic in the 19th-century European metropolis, a town like Bath increasingly served as a bastion against encroaching diversity, a place where national, social, religious and cultural homogeneity and constancy could be maintained for sections of the British upper classes. Instead of being a space of social experiment – as carried out in Wildbad as much as in Baden-Baden – “Bath was one of the nation’s premier markets for status.”⁴⁴

Within their respective national contexts, then, spas offered compensation for some dominant social features of the time, reflecting the causes and effects of

⁴¹ Borsay, *Georgian Bath*, 3.

⁴² See Geisthövel, “Promenadenmischungen,” 206. For the same year, she quotes 25,490 visitors for Wiesbaden, 12,546 for Carlsbad and 6,452 for Bad Ems.

⁴³ Stobart, “In Search of a Leisure Hierarchy,” 19f.

⁴⁴ Borsay, *Georgian Bath*, 10. He continues: “The city attracted a substantial proportion of the British élite, and of those who aspired to join its ranks.”

the different processes of modernization in both countries. Where the British, who in London had the most dynamic, international and socially diverse city in Europe, sought in their main spa stability and a satisfying return to stratified social forms, the Germans, whose largest cities could not begin to compete with London as metropolitan centres and retained many of the traits of long-established hierarchies sought in their different spas not only freedom from such structures but also a whiff of the big wide world. Thus where British spa towns acted as shock absorbers for the forces of modernization that were in full swing elsewhere, the German spas functioned more as catalysts of modernization, driving forward progress which elsewhere seemed caught in the mire of stagnation. In that sense, the respective societies in both places were extraordinary and exemplary at the same time.