

KAREN WARREN

SECRET BATH

AN UNUSUAL GUIDE



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

JOLLY'S HERITAGE ROOM

⑩

Discover the history of one of Europe's oldest department stores

House of Fraser, 13 Milsom Street, BA1 1DD

Mon–Fri 10am–6pm, Sat 9am–6pm, Sun 11am–5pm



Jolly's on Milsom street is one of the oldest, and grandest, department stores in Europe. It has a long and fascinating history and the building has retained many of its ornamental features. Visitors can learn more about the shop, and its place in the city's history, in a small heritage room crammed full of interesting artefacts.

James Jolly opened his first shop in Bath (having previously traded in Kent) in 1823. The city had become very fashionable, attracting visitors with money to spend, and in 1831 Jolly and his son Thomas opened the 'Bath Emporium' on Milsom Street, selling a range of household, luxury and novelty goods.

The shop gradually expanded to take over neighbouring buildings on Milsom Street. Over the years it was patronised by many eminent customers, including Queen Mary, wife of George V, who became a regular shopper here.

Jolly's remained a family business until it was sold in 1970. It is now owned by House of Fraser but it still has the feel of a stately, upmarket emporium. It is clearly proud of its history, and a series of heritage plaques around the store tell the story of the business and its customers.

You can find the heritage room at the top of the stairs behind the Flannels department. It has a range of artefacts covering the period during which the shop has traded. There are shelves lined with books, and display cases with letters, photos and sale notices. Old labels give an idea of the range of goods sold and the prices charged.

On the walls are pictures and artefacts, including Queen Victoria's mourning silk. There is even an old clocking-in machine of the type once routinely used to monitor the comings and goings of staff. It all goes to build up a picture of the social life of Bath over the last 200 years and the role of its first department store.

As you walk around the store look for the original decorative items, including fireplaces and elaborately carved cornices and mouldings. Perhaps the best-known feature is the peacock motif on the ground floor, an art nouveau mosaic created in the 1900s.

SLIPPERY LANE

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A hidden medieval street

Northgate Street, BA1 5AS (between Sweaty Betty and New Saville Row)

No access to lane, but visible from the end at any time



Walking down Northgate, it would be easy to miss the entrance to the narrow passage that runs between Sweaty Betty and the New Saville Row barber's shop. But look more closely and you'll get a rare insight into the life of the city in the Middle Ages.

The road in front of you is Slippery Lane, once known as Alford Lane. This narrow cobbled street once ran from the North Gate around the outer edge of the city wall and down to the River Avon. Here a ferry waited to carry passengers across the water (this ferry remained in operation until the construction of Pulteney Bridge in the 18th century).

Although some of the names and routes of Bath's medieval streets remain today (such as Bridewell Lane and Parsonage Lane), these have now become modern thoroughfares. But if you stand at the end of Slippery Lane, you get a real sense of what it might have been like to live in a town where all the roads were narrow, dark and uneven. To get the full picture, however, you also need to envisage the sounds and the smells. The street would have been full of people and dogs, and all sorts of trades were carried on both inside and outside the houses. There were open drains and the road surface would have been covered with refuse and slops (just ask yourself where the 'slippery' name came from ...!)

A particular feature of Slippery Lane was the ducking stool that used to stand by the river. This was where people – mostly women, many of them accused of witchcraft – would literally be plunged into the water as a punishment. Sometimes the hapless wretch would drown; if she floated, it was taken as proof that she was in league with the devil.

Unfortunately, the lane is now gated and you can only stand at the end and imagine walking along the ancient street. However, there is an ambitious proposal to redevelop the area and to restore public access to Slippery Lane. Perhaps one day we'll be able to walk in the steps of our medieval ancestors again.

WILLIAM BURGES WINDOW

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A rare piece of stained glass

Bath Aqua Studio
105–107 Walcot Street, BA1 5BW
bathaquaglass.com
Shop: Mon–Sat 9.30am–5pm, Sun 10am–5pm



Bath Aqua on Walcot Street is a glass-blowing studio that creates a range of jewellery, gifts and glass homeware. It is also home to a rare and exquisite piece of stained glass by the Victorian designer William Burges.

You can see the Burges window at any time during opening hours. Walk through the cafe at the front of Bath Aqua to the glass-blowing studio, and the window is on the wall on your right. You may also have the opportunity to watch the glass-blowers at work.

The window was discovered by accident in 2009 during renovation work in the vaults beneath the Bath Abbey Chambers. In fact it might still be there, unnoticed, if a glass expert from Bath Aqua had not been present when what appeared to be no more than a rather grubby window was first spotted.

The stained-glass window was removed and taken to the studio for specialist cleaning. It soon became obvious that Bath Aqua had a very fine piece of glass on their hands, but what exactly was it and what was its history?

By a stroke of good fortune, the Antiques Roadshow television programme arrived in Bath in 2010 and the glass window was physically taken to the Assembly Rooms for examination. Experts on the show confirmed that this was an original design by William Burges, an architect who designed everything from buildings to windows to furniture and jewellery.

It was established that this window was very similar to one in Cardiff Castle, known to be by Burges. However, although many of his artworks are still in existence, very few of his glass pieces seem to have survived, so this one was an exciting discovery.

Further research suggested that the window had been commissioned in the 1880s by Bath jewellers Mallet & Son for their shop in Milsom Street. It was created by a company called Saunders, who worked from Burges' design. But how it later got from Milsom Street to the Abbey Chambers is a bit of a mystery.

The window has four central panels with figures engaged in different artistic pursuits. Around the edge are brightly coloured images of sapphires, rubies and emeralds, ideal for a jewellers' shop.

THE HOLY WELL OF CHARLCOMBE

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An ancient well with healing properties for the eyes

*In the grounds of St Mary's Church, Charlcombe Lane
Bus 6 to Solsbury Way, then 12-min. walk*



Bath is known for its many wells and springs. One of the oldest is the Holy Well, in the grounds of the hidden church of St Mary in Charlcombe. It is also one of the most sacred, its water reputed to have healing properties.

St Mary's is the oldest church in Bath, predating even the abbey. The current building has Norman origins, but there is evidence of a religious community on this site as far back as the 7th century. Since early times, people would take water from the well as it was reputed to be good for the eyes. As late as the 20th century, people were still bringing bottles to use the water for the same purpose or as holy water in baptisms.

The well was originally in the grounds of the rectory but its future was threatened when the building was put up for sale in the 1980s. Protesters included a 'hermit' – a local artist who took up residence beneath a tree in the garden.

In 1986 the church obtained a court order to evict the hermit but the protests continued. Eventually a compromise was reached and the water was redirected to the well's current location at the bottom of a slope beneath the church.

The well was rededicated in 1989. The water now flows into two pools and the well is topped by a modern stone carving of the baptism of Christ. It is situated in a designated Quiet Garden, a place for private rest, prayer or reflection.

The Holy Well is still used for baptisms and for religious festivals including Ascension Day and Easter Sunday.

NEARBY

The modern pews inside St Mary's Church were made by Robert 'Mousey' Thompson, a Yorkshire furniture maker known for his oak church fittings and his trademark mouse motif. Look for the little carved mice beneath the seats.

ST MARY'S CHURCHYARD

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An atmospheric graveyard with a ruined chapel

Henrietta Road, BA2 6LY
 stmaryschurchyard.com



For many years St Mary's churchyard was one of Bath's closed-off, forgotten places. The first burial took place here in 1808 but by the 1860s the graveyard was full. New cemeteries were built elsewhere and St Mary's was allowed to fall into disrepair. It was eventually closed to the public in 1980, its secrets hidden until a group of volunteers got together to restore and reopen the historic site.

The churchyard reopened in 2006. Paths had been created and memorials repaired. And a lot of work had been done on transcribing the headstones and researching some of the people who were laid to rest here. A trail marking 21 notable graves is now available on the churchyard website.

There is plenty to discover here. There are famous people (like John Pinch the architect) and relatives of the famous (like Sophia Wren, great-granddaughter of Sir Christopher). Some were famous in their time: the tomb of Ellen Pickering reads, 'Author of 16 popular novels. Her greatest success "Nan Darrell or The Gypsy Mother". Died of scarlet fever'. One headstone simply reads 'a loyal servant'; another says – enigmatically – 'a mystery'.

Built into a wall in the corner of the churchyard are the remains of a Roman stone coffin. This is a reminder that the area was used for burying the dead long before the 19th century.

As well as being a pocket of history, St Mary's is also a peaceful retreat. There are trees with nesting boxes, birds and butterflies. And the grass between the graves has been kept in a semi-natural state. Wild flowers abound.

At the centre of the churchyard stands a ruined mortuary chapel. It was built by John Pinch, using stone from the medieval St Mary's Church, demolished in 1818. What you see now is the shell of a building, overshadowed by trees, its roof long gone. Leaves and flowers poke out of every door, window and archway. It is curiously atmospheric. You could easily imagine this as the setting for a Gothic novel.

LITTLE SOLSBURY HILL MAZE

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A labyrinth built during a road-building protest

Little Solsbury Hill, Batheaston, BA1 7JQ

*Bus 231 from Guildhall to Vale View Terrace, then 25-min. walk
Parking available in Batheaston, then follow footpath up the hill*

Little Solsbury Hill is one of the seven hills surrounding Bath. It was once topped by an Iron Age fort, but in more recent times it has



been prized as a beauty spot with walks and spectacular views. It was also the subject of a well-known 1977 song by Peter Gabriel, who lived in the area for many years.

This peaceful landscape was threatened in the 1990s when a bypass to the nearby A46 was being planned. Alarmed at the news that the new road would run along the side of the hill, protesters immediately set up camp and tried to disrupt the construction. Supporters of the protest arrived from across the country, followed by alarming reports of people being beaten by security guards, resulting in a number of hospitalisations.

Despite the violence, the protesters stayed in their camp for some months. During this time they managed to carve a seven-circuit labyrinth in the grass, in a spot overlooking the road-building site. Curiously, no one now seems to remember whose idea it was or why they chose a labyrinth as their symbol. However, the protest apparently ‘identified with the Celts’, harking back to earlier times. So perhaps the idea of a labyrinth (which goes back to antiquity) was appropriate.

In the end, the protest was unsuccessful and the road was completed in 1996, neatly cutting the hill in half. However, Little Solsbury Hill remains a popular place for walks, picnics and sunset views. And the labyrinth is still there, the only reminder of a turbulent interlude.

For more information about mazes and labyrinths, see following page.

Labyrinth in St John the Baptist Church, Batheaston

Another modern labyrinth can be found in the nearby church of St John the Baptist in Batheaston. The church suffered an arson attack in 1986, necessitating a substantial restoration of the interior. The then vicar, Paul Lucas, took the opportunity to design and build a stone floor maze in part of the church.

This maze is a copy of a 13th-century design from the abbey of St Omer in France. It features a grid of 49 x 49 squares, and symbologists will tell you that the square of 7 has particular mystical significance, connected with the goddess Venus. However, there is no evidence that the monks of St Omer chose the design for its pagan associations!

Mazes and labyrinths

The maze on Little Solsbury Hill is modern, but at one time turf mazes were a common feature of the English countryside. In the Middle Ages at least 60 were known to have existed in England and there were many others across northern Europe.

Mazes have ancient origins and appear in all mythologies. In the western tradition, they recall the Minotaur of Crete and the labyrinthine walls of Troy. Indeed, some English mazes had names like 'City of Troy' or 'Julian's Bower' (thought to be a reference to Julius, son of Aeneas, who introduced Roman mazes to the city of Troy).

Maze designs started to appear in churches in the Middle Ages, a famous example being the one in Chartres Cathedral in France. And they were built in the countryside, most often cut into grass but sometimes constructed from stones (as in some remaining mazes in Scandinavia and in the Scilly Isles in Cornwall).

Strictly speaking, these are labyrinths rather than mazes. Although there were different designs, they were all unicursal, with just one path to the centre and no false turns. This differentiates them from the later 'puzzle mazes' in which it is easy to get lost on the way to the middle.

There is much debate as to what these early mazes were actually for although it seems that they performed a mixed religious and social function. The common feature of all labyrinths is that their paths are winding and that they are very long compared with the actual distance from the entrance to the centre. This is supposed to represent the journey of the soul: the goal is clear but there are twists and turns on the way to achieving it.

Labyrinths were also linked with the idea of pilgrimage. For many people – limited by time or money or just not permitted to leave their village – an actual pilgrimage was impossible. But they could walk, or sometimes crawl on their knees, around the paths of a labyrinth, stopping for reflection or prayer at each turn.

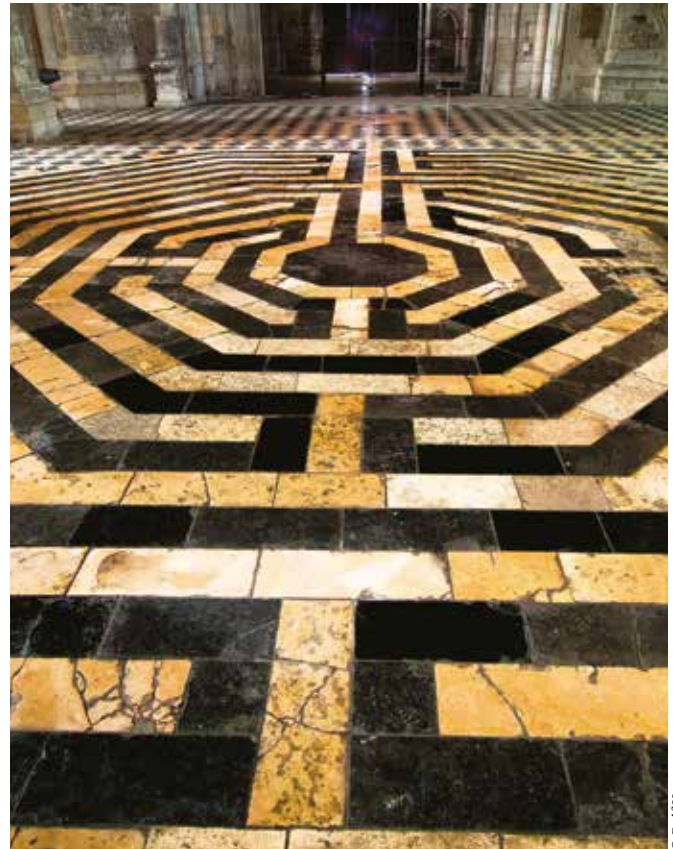
In some cases, such a 'pilgrimage' could be imposed upon a sinner as a penance. A further possibility is that mazes were used as a way to trap the Devil, or other evil spirits, who could only travel in straight lines.

Whatever the religious purpose of labyrinths, we know that they also played a part in community life. Maze games were popular, particularly during village fairs and festivals. These were usually connected with courtship and fertility rituals, and there are stories of the proceedings becoming quite lively!

There may have been some conflict between the religious and social aspects of labyrinths, as Oliver Cromwell banned maze games during the Commonwealth of 1649–60. However, they were soon revived and persisted into the 19th century.

Turf labyrinths need regular recutting if they are to survive and today only eight medieval mazes remain in England. However, there has been a recent revival of interest in labyrinths and some new mazes have been created, including some cut from turf (like the one on Little Solsbury Hill).

Most modern mazes, whether made from turf or other materials, are created as artworks rather than for religious purposes. An example of this is the Beazer Maze near Pulteney Bridge (see p. 104).



BATHEASTON SECRET GARDEN

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A historic walled garden beside the river

Stambridge, Batheaston, BA1 7NB

Bus 3 from Guildhall to Stambridge



Until the 1990s the Secret Garden in Batheaston was so secret that there was no way through the high wall surrounding it. Even now, despite its public access and riverside location, it remains quiet and secluded, a peaceful retreat on a sunny afternoon.

The garden was built as part of the adjoining Batheaston House in 1712. It was a private area with walls on two sides, the other sides bounded by the house and the river. It was laid out formally with paths and with a shell niche seat built into one wall.

In 1959 the garden was separated from the house and it gradually fell into disrepair. It was later acquired by the local council and opened to the public in 1991. But only in the last few years has it started to take its current form, thanks to the hard work of a team of volunteers.

The layout of the garden is now much as it might have been in the 18th century. The original walls and the shell niche remain, the only major change being the two gateways built into the east wall. A particular feature of these gateways is the series of modern carvings around the edges.

The Secret Garden is planted with trees, shrubs and flowerbeds. The oldest tree is a mulberry, said to be well over a hundred years old. The garden is criss-crossed with paths, creating a number of hidden areas. And there are seats where you can sit and enjoy the calm.

At the far side of the garden is a new Forest Garden area. This community project is attempting to recreate the ecosystem of a natural woodland. In the longer term, it will include a variety of useful plants – edible, medicinal and industrial.

The Forest Garden is a work in progress but it already seems to be paying dividends. A noticeboard displays some of the wildlife that can be spotted here, with an impressive range of butterflies and beetles.

KANGAROOS IN A STAINED-GLASS WINDOW

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Kangaroos, convicts and the settlement of Australia

Australia Chapel, St Nicholas Church, Bathampton, BA2 6TU

stnicholasbathampton.org.uk

Bus 11 from Guildhall to Down Lane Bottom, then 5-min. walk



The Church of St Nicholas in Bathampton is possibly the only place you'll ever see kangaroos in a stained-glass window. In fact, the whole church has an Australian feel, with a chapel dedicated to the former colony and even a small exhibition area.

The connection between Bath and Australia starts to make sense when you discover that this is the burial place of Admiral Arthur Phillip. He was the first governor of New South Wales and the founder of modern Australia. In 1788 he sailed into Botany Bay with a fleet of ships carrying convicts and set about building the new settlement.

It wasn't until 1974 that the admiral's burial place got the recognition it deserved and a part of the church was rededicated as the Australia Chapel. Built with assistance from the Australian government, it is a celebration of all things Australian, with wood and marble specially transported from down under. The windows of the chapel show the crests of the federal government and of each individual state. This is where the kangaroos come in.

At the other end of the church, information boards tell the story of Arthur Phillip and the settlement of Australia. Of particular interest is a list of the names of the 'First Fleeters', showing in each case the place of sentencing and the length of their term. (In most cases, the sentence was either seven years or life – given the near impossibility of ever returning to England, there would have been little practical difference between the two.)

By now you might be wondering how Arthur Phillip came to be buried in Bathampton. The answer is that – unlike his unfortunate human cargo – he had no difficulty in returning to England after a few years and eventually he retired to Bath for the benefit of his health. His tomb is here and once a year, in October, the High Commissioner for Australia performs a wreath-laying ceremony.

But that is not quite the end of the story, as there have since been calls for Arthur Phillip's remains to be returned to Australia.

KAREN WARREN



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AN UNUSUAL GUIDE

Where gentlemen powdered their wigs, a real-tennis court that became a factory that became a museum, Britain's oldest war memorial, a forgotten industrial relic in the heart of the city, a secret garden in Widcombe, a road that closes for six weeks a year to protect toads, a little-known view of the King's Bath, the theatre that became a church that became a Masonic lodge, an art deco interior unlike any other in the city.

Far from the crowds and the usual clichés, Bath has plenty of undiscovered hidden treasures for people who know how to wander off the beaten track.

This is an indispensable guide for those who want to really get to know Bath and especially for those who think they know it already.

Cover photo: © Simon Lee

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