Pips, Pots and Pastry Cooks

The Anatomy of an 18th-Century Lavatory in Late Georgian Bath

Bath Abbey Footprint Project

Bath Abbey Footprint Project is a £19.3 million project, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, to repair the Abbey's collapsing floor, install an eco-friendly heating system, and provide improved space and facilities for users of the Abbey.

Wessex Archaeology have uncovered remains of a Mesolithic campsite, Roman buildings, Saxon monastery, Norman Cathedral, Tudor Abbey, and remains associated with the post-medieval development of the Abbey precinct.

Location of Bath within the U.K.

Bath Abbey Footprint Project: cross-section of the Abbey, courtesy of FCB Studios

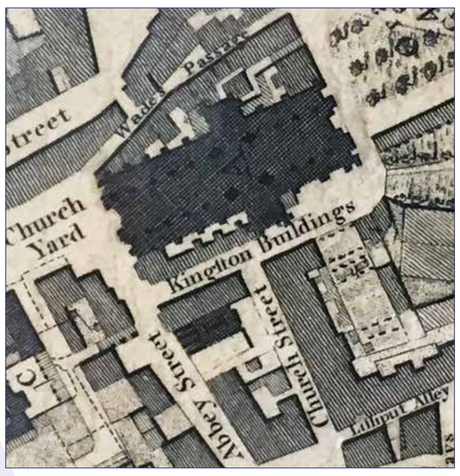
The Kingston Estate

Bath Abbey was constructed in the early 16th century as a Cathedral Priory church. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539, the priory precinct passed through a succession of private owners and most of the cloistral buildings were demolished. By the 18th century, the only surviving building was the Prior's lodgings, which had been converted into a private residence, known as Abbey House.

Development of the northern part of the precinct, then known as the Kingston Estate, began with the demolition of Abbey House in 1755. This led to the discovery of the eastern Roman Baths. These remains weren't exposed for long, and by c. 1760, the baths had been buried beneath a network of vaulted cellars that supported elevated streets lined with townhouses.

Kingston Buildings

Nos. 1–2 Kingston Buildings were built c. 1760 as a pair of two-storey houses, with shops on the ground floor and cellars below. The vaults of 2 Kingston Buildings contained a well, fitted with a hand-pump; a water cistern, installed when a piped water supply was connected in 1816; and an 18th-century lavatory. The houses were demolished in 1834.



Bath Abbey in 1794

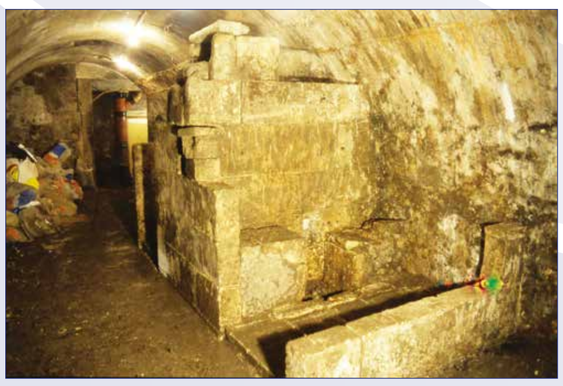
North-East view of the Abbey Church, by James Gandon, after Thomas Malton the Younger (1748-1804), showing 1-2 Kingston Buildings. Courtesy of Victoria Art Gallery, Bath

An 18th-century water closet

Most 18th-century British households had external privies, sometimes located over watercourses, but more frequently over a bucket or cesspit that was periodically emptied by 'night soil men'. Water-flushed toilets remained rare until the mid-19th century, due to the scarcity of running water.

Bath was different: this city has abundant springs and as the city developed, many 18th-century architects took the decision to install primitive forms of water closets (WCs). Most were replaced in the 19th or 20th centuries, but the remains of three survived in the cellars of 1–2 Kingston Buildings: two were excavated in 1999; a third was uncovered during the 2018 excavation.

The WC comprised a stone-lined sump and associated drains, which was flushed using waste water and rainwater. In contrast to the smooth U-bends of modern lavatories, the excavated WC had a simple rectangular sump, which incorporated a gas trap to prevent sewer smells from entering the building. The system was functional, but very prone to silting.



18th-century lavatory at 1 Kingston Buildings, excavated in 1999. Image courtesy of Bath and North East Somerset Council (Roman Baths Museum)

Recording the 18th-century lavatory in the vault of 2 Kingston Buildings

Finds from the sump

The sump was filled with black silt that contained late 18th/ early 19th-century artefacts and environmental remains, including food waste (animal bones, oyster shells, fruit pips, nuts and spice seeds); broken crockery and glassware; and various small objects, including clay tobacco pipes, corroded coins, buttons, pins, wig curlers, and a pair of silk stockings!

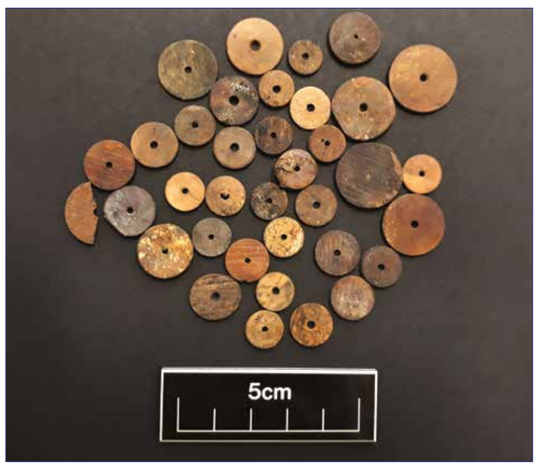
Creamware 'Simpson' tart pan; glass phials, bone toothbrushes and pearlware bowl

The ceramics comprise a typical range of Georgian domestic wares. Of note are over-glaze painted creamware patty/tart pans marked with the names Simpson and Millington. The former were probably manufactured in the 1760s for 'Simpson's Rooms', an venue used for 'promenading' in the day, and dancing, card games and gambling in the evenings, which operated c. 1745–70 and was subsequently renamed as the 'Lower Assembly Rooms'. John and Mary Millington are listed as 'pastry cooks and confectioners' at 2 Kingston Buildings in 1787–92. They were one of the many small food outlets in the vicinity of the hot springs.

The growth of specialist confectioners was to a large extent driven by the influx of cheap slave-produced sugar from British colonies. Sugared tea and sweets became widely available and an epidemic of tooth decay followed in its wake. Dentistry had traditionally been undertaken by hairdressers and blacksmiths, but in the mid-18th century, medically-trained 'surgeon-dentists' began to emerge. One of whom, George Ruspini, Surgeon-Dentist to the Prince of Wales, established a practice at 2 Kingston Buildings in 1794. One of the innovations popularized by late-18th-century surgeon-dentists was the bone toothbrush, two double-ended examples of which were found in the sump. Most double-ended toothbrushes date from the late 18th century, when they were still relatively rare, high status objects, and although it can't be proved, it seems plausible that their presence is related to Ruspini's tenure in the 1790s.

Many visitors to Bath came in search of a cure for their ailments, and there were a large number of doctors and apothecaries in the city. This is reflected in finds assemblages, which frequently contain many drug jars and glass phials, several of which were found in the sump, along with fragments of drinking/desert glasses and wine bottles. A large quantity of buttons and sewing pins were also found: these may date from the buildings use as Miss Gritten's stay, corset and millinery shop c. 1809–19.

Creamware 'Millington' tart pan

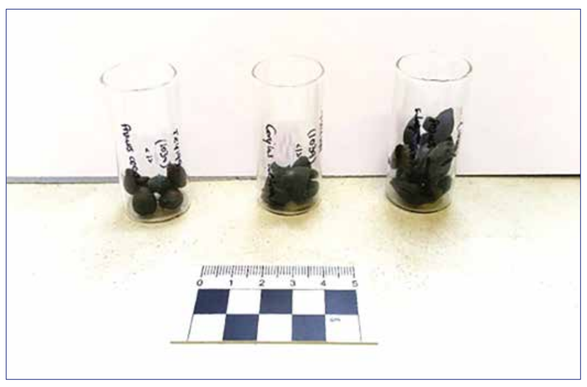


Bone buttons

A Fruit Cocktail

Environmental analysis of the WC silt revealed a diverse range of plant remains; principally those of fruits, nuts and spices. Raspberries, damsons, currants, cherries, figs, strawberries, grapes, elderberries, walnuts, pears, apples and hazelnuts, together with white pepper, coriander, cumin and mustard.

Whilst the variety of fruits and spices could simply reflect the diet of a domestic occupant, the fact that they were found in association with crockery used by a confectioner and pastry maker suggests that they more likely to be residue from cooking sweet pies and puddings for sale in the shop above.



Environmental analysis

Discussion

No. 2 Kingston Buildings was occupied c. 1760–1834 by various businesses including milliners, stay and corset makers, confectioners and pastry makers, grocers, cobblers, a tailor, a perfumer, and a dentist.

Collectively, the finds provide a snapshot of the material culture of Bath's 'middling sort' – the shopkeepers and small business owners – who provided goods and services during the height of Bath's popularity as a spa town. The finds reflect the changing consumption habits, and how industrialization and expanding of global trade networks were beginning to make luxury items, such as sugar-sweetened food, spices and fine china available to the masses at the turn of the 19th century.

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