

Title: The population, public health and the poor of Leamington Priors, 1830 – 51

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Abstract:

Little is known of the early history of Leamington Priors, but in the twelfth century the Manor of Leamington was given to the holy priors of Kenilworth and this gave the town its name. After the dissolution of the monasteries, Leamington Priors became a crown possession until Elizabeth I granted it to the Warwick family. It was at this time that the beneficial qualities of the waters first began to be known outside of the village. By the mid-seventeenth century the Warwick estates in and around Leamington Priors had been divided between four or five families but the water remained unnoticed until about 1780 when a second spring was discovered by William Abbotts, an innkeeper. In 1786 he was joined by Benjamin Setchwell, the village shoemaker, in erecting baths for the use of visitors. Though three more springs were discovered by 1806 and two small pump rooms had been erected, there was little other development in the town. In 1808 the first phase of building fashionable town houses and hotels began. This building took place, not in the old village south of the River Leam, but a few hundred yards further north on a slightly higher ground on what was to be called The Parade. In 1810 the ducal house of Gordon visited the spa and Gordon House was built the following year. They were soon followed by the Bedford family and other wealthy and fashionable visitors. In 1811 the Bedfords gave their name to the first fashionable hotel to be built in Leamington Priors, which was located in The Parade. Less than a year later the Assembly Rooms were built and in 1814 the Royal Pump Room was opened on the bank of the Leam. Developments were also taking place in the old village as new houses were being built and existing ones were let as lodgings to cope with the increasing number of visitors who came for "the season." The first phase of building came to an end in 1814 with the building of the Royal Pump Room. The next boom in building came four years later and lasted until about 1822. During this period, the Parthenon was built (1821) and contained the new assembly rooms, library and reading rooms. A further scheme began in 1825 with the building of an episcopal chapel designed by P. F. Robinson at the northern end of the parade. Bertie Circus, Clarendon Square and Beauchamp Square were planned at this time, though only Clarendon Square survives there being no trace of the other two. John Nash was commissioned to design an equally ambitious scheme for the eastern perimeter of the town, but though he certainly went to Leamington Priors to supervise the beginning of the building, it is unclear how much was actually built and how much remains. As a whole, though it never quite came off, these plans would: "as regards novelty of design, external elegance, and internal convenience, surpass anything of equal extent, in any place of fashionable resort in the Kingdom." Though the population almost double in the 1830s, there were signs of decay in the public amusements. The balls held in the Upper Assembly Rooms during the season faced a declining popularity and private parties were becoming more popular. In 1838 the town gained the right to place the prefix "Royal" in front of its name and became "Royal Leamington Spa"; in official matters though, the town was still referred to as "Leamington Priors". To save confusion the town will be referred to as "Leamington Priors" throughout this dissertation. In 1848 the London and North Western Railway reached Leamington Priors, clearing a path right through the old town. This made the town more accessible to Birmingham and Coventry businessmen and professional men, who built many of the Victoria villas which filled the gaps left by the Regency developers. The visitors included many of the wealthy and aristocratic members of the 'haut ton', and even Napoleon III resided in Clarendon Square for a time during his exile from France. Famous people from the world of music, theatre and literature such as Edmund Kean, W. C. Macready and Jenny Lind also visited the spa to perform at the theatre and concert halls. Paganini, Liszt and Johann Strauss the elder as well as many less well-known people performed there in the 1830s. This study is concerned with some of the developments taking place within the town during its heyday. Studies in the past have centred mainly on the social activities and increasing popularity of the town. Little has been written about the more basic areas of population, public health and the poor, which will be examined in this study. Extensive use has been made of the 1841 census for Leamington Priors to show a more complete picture of the town than that given by a study of the social elite. Chapter One will deal with the population structure of Leamington Priors and we will look at the age, sex and occupational distribution of the inhabitants, primarily in 1841. In the following chapter we intend to look at the conditions of the poorer inhabitants of the town; the labourers in need of relief or charity; how widespread was the poverty; and how charity and relief was dispensed. In the final chapter we will also look at the sanitary conditions of the town, especially in the areas not frequented by the visitors.