

Strathpeffer Spa

by Susan Kruse of Dingwall Museum

Before the late 1700s, the area currently known as Strathpeffer was comprised of four large farms belonging to the Mackenzies of Castle Leod and Tarbat. However, their allegiance to the Jacobite cause in the 1745 rising led to the government taking control of their lands. When they managed to buy them back in 1784, the estate had real financial issues.

Taking stock, they realised that the area had a number of wells, some iron (chalybeate) and some sulphur. The idea of creating a spa was born, with first initiatives in the late 1700s. Creative advertising was used to attract people to this 'Harrogate of the North', with promised good days of sunshine. A wooden pump room was erected in 1819 to allow visitors to take the waters. This was replaced in 1829, and extended in 1871. A second pump room was built c. 1860 and still survives.



The Lower Pump Room, before 1910. Photo ©Margaret Spark



Strathpeffer Station ©Fiona Newton

After 1861 the Cromartie estate invested more in the Spa, encouraging building of much needed accommodation and expanding facilities. The coming of the railway in 1870 helped, although due to opposition by a local landowner the village was bypassed. The nearest station was Achterneed until the branch line to the Spa opened in 1885. Sleeper trains went from London to Strathpeffer.

Many hotels and large villas were built, with visitors during the season reported in the local newspaper. The Spa Hotel advertised itself as the earliest. It burned down in 1942 while in use as a wartime hospital. Its rival, the Ben Wyvis Hotel, was built in 1879. Many of the villas were designed to be let to visitors during the season, and in some cases the family moved out to a small building in the grounds during the season. Many of the houses in the village were built in the last two decades of the 1800s and into the early 1900s.

Many doctors consulted in the village. Visitors came from as far afield as the Continent and included royalty and famous people of the day such as Sir Ernest Shackleton and Robert Louis Stevenson. The poor were allowed free water, and later a hospital was built for poor invalids. The bathing rooms had the most advanced facilities. There were concerts, excursions and sporting pursuits.



Dunnichen, one of the large villas in Strathpeffer

During WWI many buildings in Strathpeffer were taken over, including by the US Navy. After the war, the fortunes of the Spa declined. WWII brought another brief and changed focus, used for training and medical facilities.

After WWII the Spa never revived, but coach tours until Covid brought many visitors to the surviving hotels. The Pavilion continued to hold concerts which attracted coach loads of music fans from as far as Nairn or Tain, remembered by many local people. Gradually the Pavilion fell into disrepair. Now fortunately restored, it again offers a range of entertainment events. The station has also been restored, and now houses the Highland Museum of Childhood, and a display about the railway to Strathpeffer.



Pavilion reused as a hospital ward in WWI © US Navy Archives



Strathpeffer Pavilion © Fiona Newton

Further information with sources:

Archaeology for Communities in the Highlands project report

<http://www.archhighland.org.uk/userfiles/file/Remembering%20the%20Strathpeffer%20Area/2.%20Remembering%20Strathpeffer.pdf>