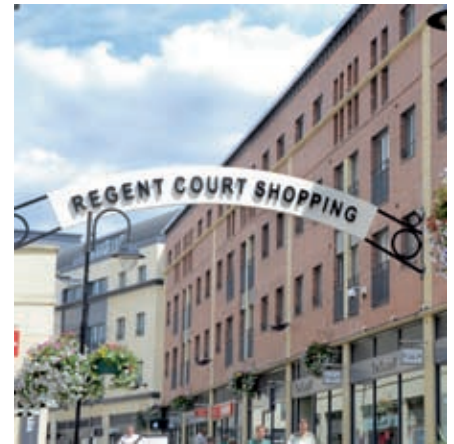


A right royal *day out*

Royal Leamington Spa has a fascinating history and successfully blends sophisticated architecture and landscaping with cosmopolitan shopping, dining and entertainment.



Royal Leamington Spa is one of only two spa towns in England to have been granted the royal prefix and this elegant town wears its title well. Wide streets, flanked by Georgian and Edwardian architecture and expansive, award-winning parks, provide a sophisticated backdrop to this Regency shopping paradise. Described as 'the best bits of London, all in a ten-minute walk', Leamington combines a treasure-trove of independent, specialist boutiques

with all the national chains you would expect to find in a much larger town or city. An impressive array of entertainment venues and cultural stops, a rich choice of restaurants, and some of the country's best spas and salons explain its enduring appeal to both residents and tourists.

The small Anglo Saxon 'Lamintone' settlement that sprang to life from the banks of the River Leam is recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086, but the story of Royal Leamington Spa as we know it today did

not begin until relatively recently. The small village, which had become known as Leamington Priors, underwent a complete transformation in the early 19th century, when the discovery of the saline springs turned Leamington Spa's fortunes around and put the town on the map.

The sudden popularity of the famous 'healing' waters brought an ever-increasing flood of wealthy visitors to the town and created a flurry of building, which created the architecture that defines the town. The Pump



Town Profile

MRS BASS AND MRS CANNING Long-standing residents



"We love Leamington. We come in every day for the shops and cafes, and just to sit and watch. We were both born in Leamington. We used to go dancing at The Embassy, up on Spencer Street, and to 'The Pally'. We'd go every night except Thursday because that was washing day. We'd go to The Illuminations – dancing with the fellas. They put a dancing tent up in Jephson Gardens. We loved that. Then we'd run home up The Parade holding our shoes, with laddered nylons and stockings feet. We had so much fun. They should have old-fashioned dance clubs now, not just for the youngsters. We'd show them how to have fun!"

Rooms and Baths, standing proudly on the banks of the river, was built in 1814 and is arguably the town's most iconic landmark. The American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, who stayed in Leamington in the 1850s, wrote that from the springs 'have gushed streets, groves, gardens, mansions, shops and churches and

spread themselves along the banks of the little River Leam'.

As time went by and the fashion for taking waters dwindled, the abundance of fine houses ensured that the town thrived as a residential area. The function of the Royal Pump Rooms has changed several times over the years and it has provided health treatments, social activities and recreational services for local residents and visitors. In 1999, it reopened as a culture centre and now contains the Leamington Spa Library, Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum, the Tourist Information Centre, refurbished function rooms and a cafe. For the very brave, spa water can still be sampled from a drinking fountain outside the Pump Rooms, but be warned, some report it tastes rather like sea water!

Leamington is now a cosmopolitan hot spot of culture, history and modern entertainment, and a short stroll around the town offers something for all tastes. Cross the river to the south side of the town and you will find the Loft Theatre, which has been entertaining the town since 1922, currently putting on around nine productions a year. In 1849, Heigler's Equestrian Circus occupied a building on the site of the present Loft Theatre. Just down from the Loft, The Assembly is an art deco masterpiece, refurbished by Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen and opened in 2008 as a multi-function venue. The Assembly has hosted a wide variety of acts, including The Kooks, The Stranglers, Peter Andre, N-Dubz, Beverley Knight and comedian Russell Howard.

Walking back over the river, look



across to the beautiful Jephson Gardens on your right. During the 1950s, the park staged The Leamington Lights, part of the Festival of Britain. All the trees and the fountains were festooned with coloured lights and there were illuminated scenes with intricate sets and an orchestra playing on the island on the lake. This miniature Blackpool attracted a staggering 30,000 visitors a week and totalled over a million in the first three years alone. Today, having undergone a £4.3 million restoration project, a visit to the gardens is a must with its dazzling floral displays, fountains and lakeside pavilion, housing the remarkable temperate Glass House showcasing exotic plants from all over the world.

Leamington was given life by its water, but it was shaped by its people. As the wealthy and powerful came to visit and settle in Leamington, so too did a vast immigrant community from all over the Empire. Maverick, risk-taking and hard-working, these people had come to make a better life for themselves and they grasped every opportunity. The cultural diversity that enriches Leamington today was shaped by these pioneers.

Leamington has its fair share of pioneers today too. A short walk off The Parade on to Regent Street reveals a beautiful little shop that opened in 1989. Cologne & Cotton, run by local sisters





property deeds, to walk elephants down The Parade to their washing place!

And so from one of Leamington's strangest memories, to her proudest – being granted the Royal prefix by Queen Victoria in 1838, who first sampled the spa waters as a princess in 1830. Perhaps one of Leamington's most magnificent sights as you walk along The Parade is that of the statue of Queen Victoria, which stands imperiously in front of the Town Hall. Erected to thank the Queen for her visit and for allowing the town to be renamed, the statue had a narrow escape from destruction by a German WWII bomb. The blast moved the statue one inch on its plinth and it has never been returned to its original position.

Queen Victoria is not the only great name to have visited Leamington. Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, the last monarch of France, arrived in the year Leamington

“It is almost impossible to believe that over 150 years ago, elephants from Heigler’s Equestrian Circus paraded solemnly through the town towards the river to bathe.”

Jenny Deeming and Vicky Shepherd, is a true Leamington success story. The sisters had spotted a gap in the market and decided to sell pure cotton bed linen at a time when it was not readily available. Today, they have seven shops nationwide, including ones in Kensington and Cheltenham, and a thriving mail order business. The original Regent Street shop is still supplying scents and linens to the

people of Leamington.

Back on the main street, The Parade, you will find an abundance of shops, boutiques, cafes and eateries, as well as the Royal Priors shopping centre. Looking at this busy modern street, it is almost impossible to believe that over 150 years ago, elephants from Heigler’s Equestrian Circus paraded solemnly through the town towards the river to

bathe. The elephants were housed in a building that still stands on Morrell Street and every day they were walked down to what is now known as the Elephant Walk, at the side of the Mill Bridge Weir. In a quirk of historical statute, the present owner of the Old Elephant House in Morrell Street still has the right, set out in his

HELENA AND AMY
Mother and daughter



“The best thing about Leamington is the choice of shops. There are chains and also boutiques. Everything’s within quite a small area, so it’s easily accessible and there’s a sense of quality about the town. It’s great in the summer, with the parks and the Peace Festival, and The Assembly is amazing for young people.”



Town Profile



was granted its Royal status and he stayed for a year at No. 6, Clarendon Square. The famous visitor is commemorated on a blue plaque at the property, which is now called Napoleon House. Winston Churchill visited during World War II to meet his then Deputy Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, lifelong MP for Leamington and Warwick, who succeeded Churchill as prime minister in 1955. King George VI also met Sir Anthony Eden when he visited the town. His daughter, our own Queen Elizabeth II, opened the Royal Priors shopping centre in 1998 and returned to Leamington on 4 March this year, accompanied by the Duke of Edinburgh.

Leamington's literary connections include Charles Dickens, who visited in

1855 and 1862, after sending one of his characters, Paul Dombey, from his novel *Dombey and Sons* ahead of him to check it out. Paul Dombey came to the spa town to recuperate following a family tragedy and we can only hope that he found the healing waters restorative.

For those looking for something with a more energetic bent, take a trip back over the bridge and turn right along Avenue Road to the site of the old Manor House Hotel, home to the first lawn tennis club in the world, formed by Major Harry Gem. It was at this tennis club that the modern rules of lawn tennis were drawn up in 1874. To the east of the town, crossing back over The Parade, is The Newbold Comyn Golf Club, a beautiful 18-hole,



DAVID MCNAMEE
Professional footballer



"When I first came to Leamington to play for Coventry City FC, I had a bachelor pad in the centre of the town and the nightlife was great. The lads all loved the variety of bars and clubs. I was lucky enough to meet my partner in Leamington and now, as a family man, I think it's a great place to bring up children. It feels very safe. There are plenty of really good restaurants, from chains to unique, independent places such as Wilde's. With all the good parks, it's perfect for little ones, and there's also lots to entertain them as they get older."

par 70 course. From kayaking at the Leam Boat Club to going for the burn at one of Leamington's numerous gyms or health clubs, there is plenty to keep the virtuous among us busy.

Royal Leamington Spa's sophisticated combination of established elegance with a modern buzz earns it a place as one of the country's best-loved towns. Whether you are local to the town or a first time visitor, Royal Leamington Spa has something for everyone. ■

