

# WALKING TOUR OF CHELTENHAM

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL  
REGENCY TOWN IN ENGLAND



Jonathan Copeland

WALKING TOUR OF  
CHELTENHAM

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL REGENCY TOWN IN ENGLAND

Jonathan Copeland

WALKING TOUR OF CHELTENHAM  
THE MOST BEAUTIFUL REGENCY TOWN IN ENGLAND

Jonathan Copeland

First published in 2018

PDF Edition

© Jonathan Copeland, 2018.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, copied or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Cover image and images (except in Part 3): Copyright © Jonathan Copeland, 2018.

**What they said about**  
*Walking Tour of Cheltenham*  
*The Most Beautiful Regency Town in England*

“Jonathan Copeland takes us on a lucid and enlightening stroll through the streets of Cheltenham. Whatever your pace – and whatever your distance – this wonderful guide gives context and depth to the city’s rich history and architecture.”

**Peter Stark**, adventure writer, author of *Astoria: John Jacob Astor and Thomas Jefferson’s Lost Pacific Empire*

“A sublime account of 18th century British history when the country changed out of all recognition and the kings were foreign and sometimes mad.”

**Ni Wayan Murni**, owner of Murni’s Warung, Murni’s Warung Shop and Murni’s Houses and Spa, Ubud, Bali ([www.murnis.com](http://www.murnis.com))

“The architecture, the history, what to look for, all simply explained.”

**Queens Hotel, Cheltenham, since 1838**

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[What they said about \*Walking Tour of Cheltenham\*](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Coat of Arms](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Maps of Cheltenham](#)

## **[Part 1: CHELTENHAM](#)**

### **[Part 2: WHAT WAS GOING ON](#)**

[King William III \(reigned 1689-1702\)](#)

[Queen Anne \(reigned 1702-1714\)](#)

[King George I \(reigned 1714-1727\)](#)

[King George II \(reigned 1727-1760\)](#)

For  
Murni, Roger and Ray

# COAT OF ARMS



## INTRODUCTION

This book is a guide to walking through the streets of Cheltenham. It is a delightful town, full of wonderful architectural gems, all of which have interesting stories to tell. It was a fashionable place to visit in Georgian and Regency England at a time of momentous change, when foreign kings ruled the country. It was when Britain successfully fought to be the leading player on the world stage, becoming modern and global in the process.

Fortunately the most interesting places to see can be covered on foot in a day or two. Don't rush. It is a town full of history, buildings, shops and many fine restaurants. You will find the locals are friendly and happy to chat.

I hope you enjoy the book and the photographs and most of all the town of Cheltenham.

Jonathan Copeland

Rye,

East Sussex

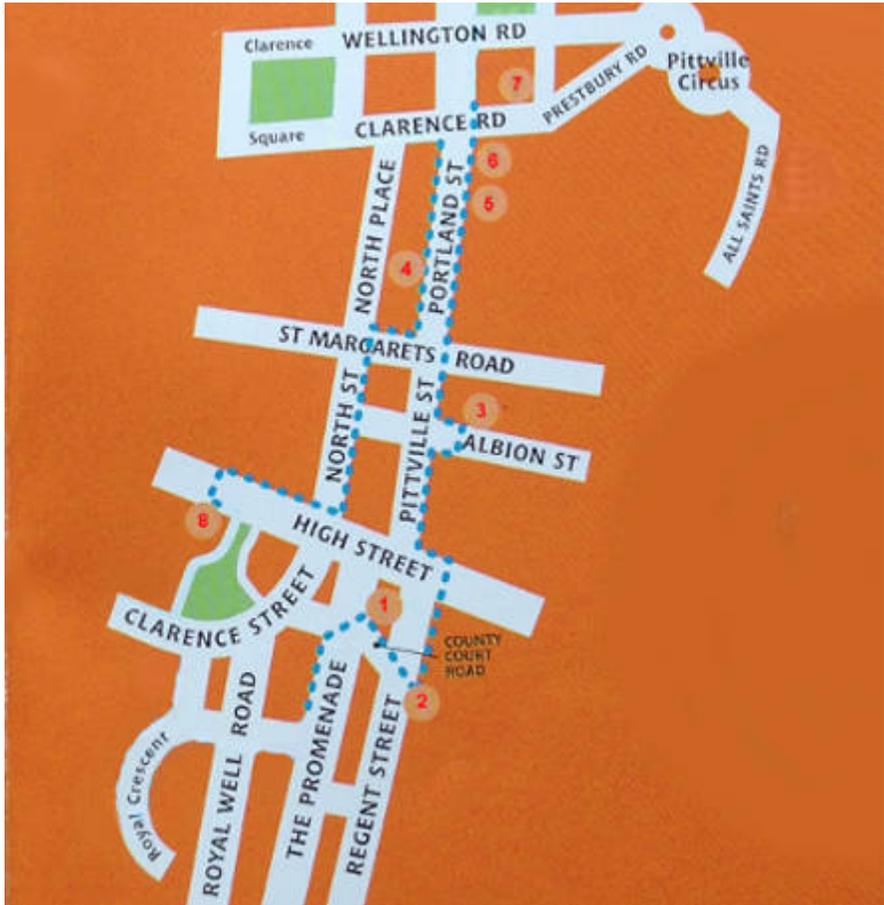
[jonathan@murnis.com](mailto:jonathan@murnis.com)

# MAPS OF CHELTENHAM

## SOUTH CHELTENHAM



## NORTH CHELTENHAM



# PART 1

CHELTENHAM

Cheltenham is in an area of outstanding natural beauty and is the most beautiful Regency town in England. It is conveniently situated on the edge of charming Cotswolds countryside with its quaint honey-coloured stone village houses. In spite of some wartime damage and modern building, the town has kept its original Regency character.

Cheltenham was first mentioned in 803 as Celtan hom. The Domesday Book, which was completed in 1086, called it Chintenha[m]. It was awarded a market charter in 1226 and became a little country village clustered around a mediaeval church, St. Mary's Minster, until a Quaker farmer called William Mason bought a field in 1716 in Bayshill from Mr Higgs of Charlton Kings. That's where the Cheltenham Ladies' College now stands. He planned to farm it, but those plans changed.

This was the time when spa towns, such as Bath and Tunbridge Wells, were becoming increasingly popular as health resorts for the wealthy. The waters were believed to be beneficial for one's health and drinking them a cure for a large number of illnesses, especially rheumatism and skin problems. Improvements in roads and coaches made it easier to travel to new destinations.

William Mason noticed a trickle of mineral water coming from a natural spring along the edge of the field. He spotted pigeons were pecking at salt deposits from the saline and mildly chalybeate water around the site. That is why the pigeon is a symbol of the town today and appears on modern signposts around the town. At first the spring was left open and anyone who wished to do so could drink the waters, but later Mason fenced the area and built a thatched hut over the spring. Then he sold glasses of the mineral water to the public and became fairly successful.

In 1721 Mason retired to Bristol and leased the well to Mr Spencer for £61 per annum. Mason died in 1738. His daughter Elizabeth and son-in-law, Henry Skillicorne (1678–1763), a Manx sea captain, inherited the property. When they married in 1732 he was about fifty-four and she was about twenty. Henry set about developing the Old Well. The publication in 1734 of Dr Short's *History of Mineral Waters*, which declared Cheltenham's waters some of the best in the land, roused national interest. In 1738 he deepened the spring to make a proper well, installed pumping apparatus and secured the spring from all extraneous matter. He erected an

elaborate well house with a ballroom and upstairs billiard room to entertain the guests. The reputation of the spa's waters grew. As the number of visitors increased, more improvements to the well were carried out and the spa business took off. It attracted celebrities, including George Frederick Handel, Samuel Johnson, the poet William Shenstone and various aristocrats.

Henry Skillicorne designed Cheltenham's famous tree-lined promenades and gardens with the help of friends. The well received hundreds of paying visitors each year until the late 1750's when a smallpox epidemic broke out. After Henry Skillcorne died in 1763 his son William took over the spa. Doctors recommended Cheltenham's spa waters as a cure for many problems, pimples, gout, leg ulcers and biliousness. The spa became a profitable business. The town catered for the visitors: a new theatre and assembly rooms were built, pavements and street lamps were erected, but it was a royal visit that really put Cheltenham on the map.

In 1788 King George III had a nasty bilious attack and his doctor recommended the waters at Cheltenham. The King left Windsor Castle on 12 July 1788 and arrived in Cheltenham with Queen Charlotte and the three eldest royal princesses and stayed at Lord Fauconberg's Bayshill House for five weeks. The King was probably suffering from the early stages of a rare genetic liver disease called porphyria as he was also suffering from rashes, cramps, difficulty in breathing and mood swings.

It was a relaxed and informal visit. The King rose early and visited the well at 6 o'clock every morning. He tasted the waters and went riding in the Cotswolds or walked around the town talking to shop keepers and residents. He also went several times to the town's new purpose-built theatre, which had been established in 1782 by an Irish actor turned theatre manager John Boles Watson. He renamed it Theatre Royal. George III also visited the assembly rooms and the church.

When the royal party left on 16 August all Cheltenham saw them off and a band played God Save the King. Cheltenham was now the place to go and be seen; it was fashionable. William Skillicorne changed the name of his business to Royal Old Well. The King planned to return the following year, but was advised that sea bathing may be better, so he went to Weymouth every year bar three between 1789 and 1805. He never returned to Cheltenham.

Between 1700 and 1800 the population rose from 1,500 to over 3,000 and by 1850 it was the largest town in Gloucestershire. Other members of the English Royal family and Continental Royal families visited Cheltenham, including Princess (later

Queen) Victoria. Lord Byron, Jane Austen, Oscar Wilde, Charles Dickens and Franz Liszt also came to sample the waters.

Arthur Wellesley (1769-1852) visited Cheltenham four times. He was a former Irish MP and ex-Governor of Mysore in India and became the First Duke of Wellington and was one of the leading military and political figures of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. He was Prime Minister four times. Wellesley suffered from a liver complaint and recommended the waters to his officers. He defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

Cheltenham developed quickly. There was a search to find more springs. New wells were opened and visitors to the town increased. Montpellier Baths, the Montpellier Spa, the Sherborne (or Imperial) Spa, Cambray Spa, Alstone Spa and Pittville Pump Room were the leading, flourishing spas. There were others. Cheltenham's heyday as a fashionable spa town was between 1790 and 1840.

The town was laid out in fine squares, wide tree-lined avenues, and elegant terraces. Speculators entered the market and numerous lodging houses were built.

Some of the spas had their own tree-lined walks, rides and gardens in which visitors could promenade, often with a band of musicians. Public breakfasts, firework displays, gala fêtes and other entertainments were held at the larger spas. Visitors attended balls, assemblies and concerts at the Assembly Rooms, plays at the Theatre Royal and horse races at the Racecourse. They could shop on the High Street and from the 1820s new fashionable shopping areas at Montpellier and the Promenade were created.

Horse racing started in Cheltenham in 1815. Cheltenham Racecourse, in the nearby village of Prestbury, is still the home of National Hunt. Meetings are held from October to April. The highlight of the season is the Cheltenham Gold Cup in the middle of March for four days. The Gold Cup attracts over 200,000 people, doubling the population of the town, and over £500 million are bet on just 26 races.

Cheltenham railway station is still called *Cheltenham Spa*—not to be confused with the restored station at Cheltenham Racecourse, which is the southern terminus of the Gloucestershire Warwickshire Railway heritage steam railway. Between 1932 and 1935 the Cheltenham Flyer was the world's fastest steam train at 71.4 miles per hour.

From the 1830s onwards, spas went into decline and most of Cheltenham's are now gone. In 1849 Skillicorne's Royal Old Well buildings were demolished, replaced with entertainment venues and by 1897 the waters were completely underground as a result of Cheltenham Ladies' College buying the land.

In 1925 Cheltenham was advertised as ‘the Carlsbad of England’. Carlsbad is a city near San Diego in California, where they discovered mineral waters in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the Second World War, the United States Army Service of Supply, European Theatre of Operations established its primary headquarters at Cheltenham under the direction of Lt. Gen. John C. H. Lee.

The town is famous for its festivals and its ability to attract first rate national and international participants. The list of festivals includes the Cheltenham Literature Festival, the Cheltenham Jazz Festival, the Cheltenham Science Festival, the Cheltenham Music Festival and the Cheltenham Food & Drink Festival.

Added to the list are the Cheltenham Paranormal Festival, Cheltenham Design Festival, Cheltenham Folk Festival, Cheltenham Poetry Festival, True Believers Comic Festival, Cheltenham Comedy Festival and that’s not all.

On 1 November 1963 The Beatles played The Odeon cinema in Winchcombe Street, Cheltenham. It was the opening of their fourth British tour. They played ten songs: *I Saw Her Standing There*, *From Me To You*, *All My Loving*, *You Really Got A Hold On Me*, *Roll Over Beethoven*, *Boys*, *Till There Was You*, *She Loves You*, *Money (That’s What I Want)* and *Twist And Shout*.

The following day the *Daily Mirror* newspaper carried the headline, *Beatlemania! It’s happening everywhere... even in sedate Cheltenham*. This is thought by some to be the first use of the word Beatlemania in print. They were unable to leave their rooms out of fear for their own safety and played Scalextric, a popular car-racing game, to pass the time. This was The Beatles’ only concert in Cheltenham.

2010 estimates from the Office for National Statistics put Cheltenham’s population at 115,300.

Cheltenham was named the UK’s fifth ‘most musical’ town by PRS for Music in 2010 and *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper named Cheltenham as the best place in the United Kingdom to raise a family in 2014.

## PART 2

WHAT WAS GOING ON

To put Cheltenham into context, here is a brief sketch of what was going on at the time and why the English monarchs were not English.

Queen Anne (1665-1714) died in 1714, the last of the Stuarts, the end of an era, and ushered in the four Georgian Kings. Although her statue is in front of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, she is not much remembered these days, and many people think the statue is of Queen Victoria. She was the second daughter of James II (reigned 1685-1688) and came to the throne in 1702 when the previous monarch, the Dutch Protestant King William III, died without any children.

Queen Anne, also a Protestant, also had no surviving children, although not for want of trying. She had seventeen, all of whom died in infancy, apart from her son Prince William, who died from fluid on the brain at the age of eleven.

It is hard, perhaps impossible, for us to understand the dominant, all-pervasive role of religion five hundred years ago. King Henry VIII (reigned 1509-1547) broke away from the old Catholic faith in 1534 so that he could get divorced from his first wife, Queen Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536), after she had failed to produce a male heir. Catherine was considered too old to have any more children. Henry had already decided who his next wife would be—Anne Boleyn (1501-1536). Obedience to the authority of the Roman Church was made treasonable and punishable by death.

The country was now strongly Protestant and did not want to return to the old Roman Catholic faith. The previous Stuart kings, however, who reigned before Queen Anne, had Catholic sympathies. Anne's father James II actually converted to Catholicism, packed the privy council and judiciary with Catholics and put them in powerful positions. He married a Catholic Italian princess Mary of Modena after his first wife died and to make matters worse had a son, James Stuart, on 10 June 1688, which made a succeeding Catholic monarch very likely, as he took precedence over James' Protestant daughter Mary by his previous marriage. On birth young Catholic James Stuart became first in line to the throne.

## King William III (reigned 1689-1702)



To ward off the prospect of a return to a Catholic monarchy, on 30 June 1688, only twenty days after the birth, a group of six aristocrats and the Bishop of London invited the Dutch Head of State William of Orange (1650-1702), to take the throne. William was a Protestant hero, who had resisted a French assault on the Netherlands in 1672 by flooding the dykes and immediately stopping the French army's advance. William was delighted at the invitation as he was concerned that King Louis XIV of France (reigned 1643-1715) and James II might get together and jointly invade the Netherlands.

Louis XIV called himself 'le Roi Soleil', 'the Sun King', and holds the record for the longest reigning European monarch ever—seventy-two years—longer than Queen Victoria or Queen Elizabeth II.

William was half English and well connected to the English royal family—his mother Mary was the daughter of King Charles I of England (reigned 1625-1649)—and his wife, by an arranged marriage in 1677, was his maternal uncle James II's daughter Mary, Anne's elder sister, his fifteen year old first cousin when they married—and a Protestant.

On 1 November 1688 William set sail with a huge fleet of 463 ships, including fifty-three warships and 40,000 men. They landed at Torbay, Devon on the south coast of England and fortunately for him James II fled to France without a fight. William really had no right to the crown as Parliament had not invited him, nor had the king.

It was called the Glorious Revolution because no blood was shed. King William III and Queen Mary II were crowned jointly at Westminster Abbey in April 1689. Parliament was in control and now supreme. The divine right of kings came to an abrupt end—for ever. William knew that his position depended on Parliament. He was morose and bad tempered and preferred the Netherlands but Mary was popular. Unfortunately she contracted smallpox and died in the winter of 1694. A distraught and grief-stricken William became sole ruler.

William's main concern was the hugely expensive war with France, known as the Nine Years War, now in its sixth year. Charles Montagu found the solution: the creation of a central bank in 1694, the Bank of England, whereby subscribers would lend money to the government on condition that annual interest would be guaranteed by Parliament from new taxes on beer and alcohol: the start of the 'national debt'. France had nothing like it and was at a disadvantage. Smaller banks were formed in London and new methods of finance were created. Deals were done in numerous coffee-houses in the City of London, the most famous ones being Jonathan's and Garraway's, both in Exchange Alley, now known as Change Alley.

Power remained with the small landed élite, who were mostly Anglicans. The financial revolution produced a moneyed class, but they did not wield real power. Even as late as the reign of King George III (reigned 1760-1820) a person engaged in trade could not become a peer. In the middle rung were the farmers, business owners, government officials, city merchants, clergymen, doctors, lawyers, and

shopkeepers. Below them was a huge number of manual workers and at the bottom of the heap the poor and destitute.

The Nine Years War was concluded by the Peace of Ryswick 1697 largely in King William III's favour and under which King Louis XIV recognised him as the rightful king of England, not James II, and Queen Mary II as queen. He promised not to give any more aid to James II's supporters. It would be a temporary peace.

It did not take long for war to break out again, essentially caused by King Louis XIV's continuing desire to rule Europe. The Spanish Emperor, Emperor Charles II, better known as Charles the Sufferer because of his numerous mental and physical disabilities, had no heir. The Holy Roman Emperor, Emperor Leopold of Austria, claimed the inheritance on behalf of his son. Emperor Charles II though named Louis XIV's grandson Philip Duke of Anjou as his successor, a situation which King William III could not accept.

In November 1700 three weeks after Charles' death Louis proclaimed his grandson as Philip V of Spain. That was bad enough. Then in September 1701 James II died in Paris, and Louis recognised his exiled young son as James III King of England in flagrant breach of the Peace of Ryswick 1697. By the end of the year Holland, England and Austria were at war with France. The War of the Spanish Succession lasted fourteen years.

To avoid the risk of a Catholic coming to the throne in the future, the matter was enshrined and set in stone by an Act of Parliament called the Act of Settlement 1701, which provided that any future monarch had to be a member of the Church of England and not marry a Catholic. He could not leave England, Scotland or Ireland without the consent of Parliament. Today, the monarch still has to be a member of the Church of England and is actually head of it, but disqualification arising from marriage to a Roman Catholic was removed by the Succession to the Crown Act 2013.

William fell from his horse Sorrel when he tripped on a mole-hill in the park in Hampton Court and broke his collar bone. Pneumonia set in, from which he died in March 1702.

## Queen Anne (reigned 1702-1714)



Mary's short, gout-ridden, thirty-seven year old sister and William's sister-in-law took the throne as Queen Anne.

The war with the French continued. England and Scotland united to form the Kingdom of Great Britain by the Act of Union 1707 with one sovereign and one parliament, but Scotland retaining its church, law and local administration. It gave England security against a French invasion through the back door of Scotland and created the largest free trade area in the world. Following a referendum in 1977, in which the Scottish electorate voted for devolution, the Scotland Act 1978 was passed and the Scottish Parliament, closed for 300 years, reopened on 12 May 1979.

The best news in the early years of Anne's reign was the overwhelming defeat of Louis XIV's forces by the Duke of Marlborough at Blenheim (actually Blindheim) in Bavaria in 1704. The French lost 34,000 men with 14,000 taken prisoner or injured, while the English and their allies lost about 14,000. Nobody dared tell King Louis XIV about the defeat until his mistress Madame Maintenon plucked up the courage.

In 1706 Marlborough commanded another great victory at Ramillies causing the French to withdraw from the Spanish Netherlands and a number of cities, but not Spain. Philip V stayed the King of Spain for almost forty years.

In 1708 Anne's husband Prince George of Denmark died.

The tide turned in 1709 when the English only won a paper victory at Malplaquet losing 20,000 men while the French lost half that. Britain got tired of war and France had lost. The Treaty of Utrecht 1713, signed by the participants, marked the end of the danger that King Louis XIV posed to Europe and the maritime, commercial and financial supremacy of Great Britain.

The Treaty recognised Louis XIV's grandson Philip V as King of Spain. However, Philip renounced any right to the French throne and various French princelings, including the Duke of Berry (Louis XIV's youngest grandson) and the Duke of Orléans (Louis's nephew), renounced any claim to the Spanish throne. The crowns of France and Spain would never be joined, William's primary concern. Spain ceded Gibraltar and Minorca to Great Britain and gave Britain the *Asiento*, a monopoly on the African slave trade to the Spanish colonies in America. France ceded to Great Britain its claims to Newfoundland. The Treaty kept the peace between France and England for the next fifteen years. On 1 September 1715 King Louis XIV died of gangrene caused by bad blood circulation.

Enclosures to create larger, more economic farms, innovations and improvements in agriculture, crop rotations and drainage were slowly taking place, increasing efficiency, reducing prices and feeding the growing population. Enclosure, first by agreement, but given statutory force under the Inclosure Act 1773, enabled enclosure of land and removed villagers' rights of common land.

Queen Anne's gout got worse and she died on 1 August 1714. The same day Prince George Ludwig of Hanover was proclaimed King of Great Britain, France and Ireland.

The childless Anne had fifty-seven closer hereditary successors, but they were not Protestants. Britain followed the provisions of the Act of Settlement 1701 to find a Protestant successor. They had to go all the way back to King James I's daughter,

Anne of Bohemia, and down the line to find the first Protestant successor, who turned out to be the lucky Hanoverian prince, Prince George Ludwig, who took the throne as King George I. England now had a German king, whose descendants still occupy the British throne.

## King George I (reigned 1714-1727)



King George I (1660-1727) arrived at Greenwich on 18 September 1714, aged fifty-four, barely speaking English, with ninety staff, two Turkish servants, Mehmet and Mustafa, and two mistresses, Fraülein von Schulenberg and Frau von Kielmannsegge. He had visited England only once before and said that he did not like it and preferred his princely state (Germany as a country did not exist then). He continued to visit his princely state in Hanover, sometimes for six months at a time.

George let Lord Stanhope run the country as first minister and Robert Walpole, who was a Norfolk landowner, as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Walpole became the country's first Prime Minister and was given a town house, 10 Downing Street, London, which still houses the Prime Minister. He inaugurated many of the

government rules and procedures still in use today. Walpole's policy was to avoid war and promote trade. Trade became the most important activity of the nation. The monarch's previous dominant position irretrievably gave way to parliamentary government. Queen Anne was the last monarch to chair ministerial meetings.

George brought his German courtiers with him and they built houses in Hanover Square, London with façades using German patterns. It was the beginning of English Georgian architecture. It was also the beginning of satire with Pope, Swift, Defoe and Johnson. The liberal philosophies of John Locke and Berkeley were debated. The Church of England became moribund, while John Wesley (1703-1791) preached firebrand Methodism all over the country, including Cheltenham.

Aristocrats took off to Europe on the Grand Tour and came back laden with works of art and antiques, which meant they had to build suitably grand houses in which to display them. English provincial towns grew and prospered. With towns came shops and bow windows to display goods. With goods came advertising. The concept of a 'consumer' emerged in the 1720s.

Baroque architecture gave way to Italian Palladianism for the rest of the century. Convolutions and fussiness were out; proportions, harmony and restraint were in. There was a certain lightness of being.

George's favourite composer, Georg Frideric Handel (1685–1759) changed his name to George Frederick Handel and moved to London in 1710. In 1726 he decided to make London his permanent home and become a British citizen. Handel was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Upward mobility was possible now and a new, prosperous, fashion-conscious middle class emerged, exemplified by the inhabitants of the spa towns of Bath and Cheltenham. Green tea was everyone's favourite drink.

Gambling became a national pastime for all levels of society. Gaming houses were everywhere. Lotteries, instituted in 1708, were popular. The most spectacular example of the almost universal craze to get rich quick was the South Sea Bubble created by the South Sea Company, established in 1711 to rival the Bank of England. It had been slave trading with South America and making profits for a decade or so. The fever started in 1720. The Company acquired a large portion of the national debt and the stock price rose and rose and rose. You could make an enormous profit within days. Women sold their jewelry just to buy shares. The bubble burst when the Company could not pay for stocks being returned. There had been insider dealing between ministers and the directors. The stock fell from almost £1,000 a share to

£150. Companies failed. So did banks and goldsmiths as they could not collect loans made on the stock. Thousands of people were ruined, including many members of the aristocracy. Robert Walpole calmed the public's widespread anger and earned the gratitude of the King and Parliament.

The new popular drink gin, introduced from Holland by King William III, became a craze at this time and drowned the sorrows of the poor. At least they weren't drinking French brandy. It was sold in weavers' shops, hairdressers, carpenters, shoemakers, madhouses and prisons, from wheelbarrows, workhouses and back rooms. By the end of George's rule there was one gin shop for every eleven dwellings in London. Women were involved in the distilling of it, as well as the drinking. They even gave it to their children. Drinkers were dropping dead on the streets, literally dead drunk. Overconsumption became a major problem. The Gin Act 1736 taxed and licensed gin shops and consumption declined a bit, but it continued. The new Act encouraged illegal selling. William Hogarth made his famous print called *Gin Lane* in 1751. The fashion changed, helped by an increase in cost due to bad harvests, and possibly Methodism. The new craze was tea.

George hated his son, George Augustus and the feeling was mutual. George Augustus created his own rival court with his popular wife Princess Caroline of Ansbach at Leicester House in London.

In June 1727 George I travelled to Germany. Within seven days he was complaining of stomach pains after eating a lot of strawberries and oranges. He fell into a coma and died.

## King George II (reigned 1727-1760)



His son George II (1683-1760) succeeded him, a man also influenced by his Germanic upbringing, who spoke English with a strong German accent. He was more popular than his father but was irritable. He kicked his servants and was rude to visitors. As was normal in this family, he detested his son, Frederick, Prince of

Wales. Queen Caroline said, ‘My dear first-born is the greatest ass ...’ She also said, ‘Popularity always makes me sick; but Fretz’s popularity makes me want to vomit.’

Robert Walpole managed to provide King George II with even more funds from the Civil List than his father got; in return Walpole continued to govern for another fifteen years until he resigned in 1742 and retired to the House of Lords as the Earl of Oxford. George II and Walpole were friends for life.

In 1729 John Gay’s satirical play *The Beggar’s Opera* was staged at The Theatre Royal, Lincoln’s Inn Fields and disparaged Walpole. Sir Robert was able to get his own back by introducing the Licensing Act 1737 under which all plays (but not novels) had to be censored by the Lord Chamberlain—no obscenity, blasphemy or political satire. It remained largely in force until 1968.

Parliamentarians were not paid and patronage and bribery (perhaps the same thing) were widespread. King George II worked hard. He enjoyed wars and was the last British monarch to get on his horse and fight on the front line—at the age of fifty-nine.

But by 1731 real power was coalescing around the brilliant, eloquent, aloof William Pitt, who would dominate politics for the next forty years—and who later became known as William Pitt the Elder. He attached himself to the King’s son Frederick, the Prince of Wales. The King complained, ‘Ministers are the kings in this country. I am nothing here.’

The Seven Years War (1756-1763) was, according to Winston Churchill the first world war, between England and Prussia on the one hand and France, Spain and Russia on the other. It did not start well for the British. The French were threatening British Minorca, so Admiral Byng was dispatched from Gibraltar with ten warships. The battle was confused. Byng thought he had done enough and sailed back. The British garrison on Minorca surrendered. The Admiralty, keen to shift the blame on to Byng, court-martialled him for ‘not doing his utmost.’ He was shot on the deck of HMS *Monarch*. It provoked Voltaire (1694-1778), who was exiled to England in 1726 for two and a half years, to pen his famous lines in his novel *Candide* that ‘it is a good idea to kill an admiral from time to time, simply to encourage the others.’

The battle for naval and commercial supremacy, which is what the war was really about, spread from Europe to America, the Caribbean, Africa and India. Pitt had a vision of a global trading empire for Britain. It meant raising taxes but it succeeded. The foundations of the British Empire were laid in India, when Robert Clive beat the Nawab of Bengal and his French allies at the Battle of Plassey on 23 June 1757

taking control of Bengal with its thirty million people and within three years the French were removed from South India. British forces drove the French out of most of Canada, most spectacularly when Major-General James Wolfe (1727-1759) scaled the Heights of Abraham and captured the French capital of Quebec in 1759, being shot and dying in the victory. Britain also took control of what is now the USA.

Back in London, in 1759 the British Museum opened at Montague House to accommodate the collection of Sir Hans Sloane.

Before long America would be clamouring for independence. George II, however, did not live to see it. Early on 15 October 1760 he rose early to have his hot chocolate, fell in the water-closet, cut his head open and died.