



“What Part of Bath Do You
Think They Will Settle In?”:
Jane Austen’s Use of Bath
in *Persuasion*

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LOCATION IS EVERYTHING, they say in the business world. Why does one side of the street attract more customers than the other, and why does a family choose one neighborhood when moving into a new town rather than another, or for that matter why does one choose a city to live in over another—it seems shopkeepers and businessmen are not the only ones concerned with location. It is interesting in this respect that Bath is the setting, in part, of both Jane Austen’s first novel, *Northanger Abbey*, and her last, *Persuasion*. This paper deals specifically with how Jane Austen used Bath in *Persuasion*, how the topography of Bath relates to the characters, and how the location of various characters mirrors the society Austen portrays.

We should first review briefly the growth process of eighteenth-century Bath. For many years after its establishment as a spa by the Romans in the first century, Bath remained a walled, Medieval town, built at the low end of a slope stretching down to the River Avon which bends sharply at one point to give the city its eastern and southern boundaries. “The Map of Bath, 1717” in Emma Austen-Leigh’s *Jane Austen and Bath* (20) shows the North Gate, South Gate, West Gate and East Gate. From the West Gate to the South Gate the city is bounded by a quarter circle Borough Wall, whereas the rest of the city is bounded by straight walls on five sides. In this Medieval part of the city we find the ancient Bath Abbey, the

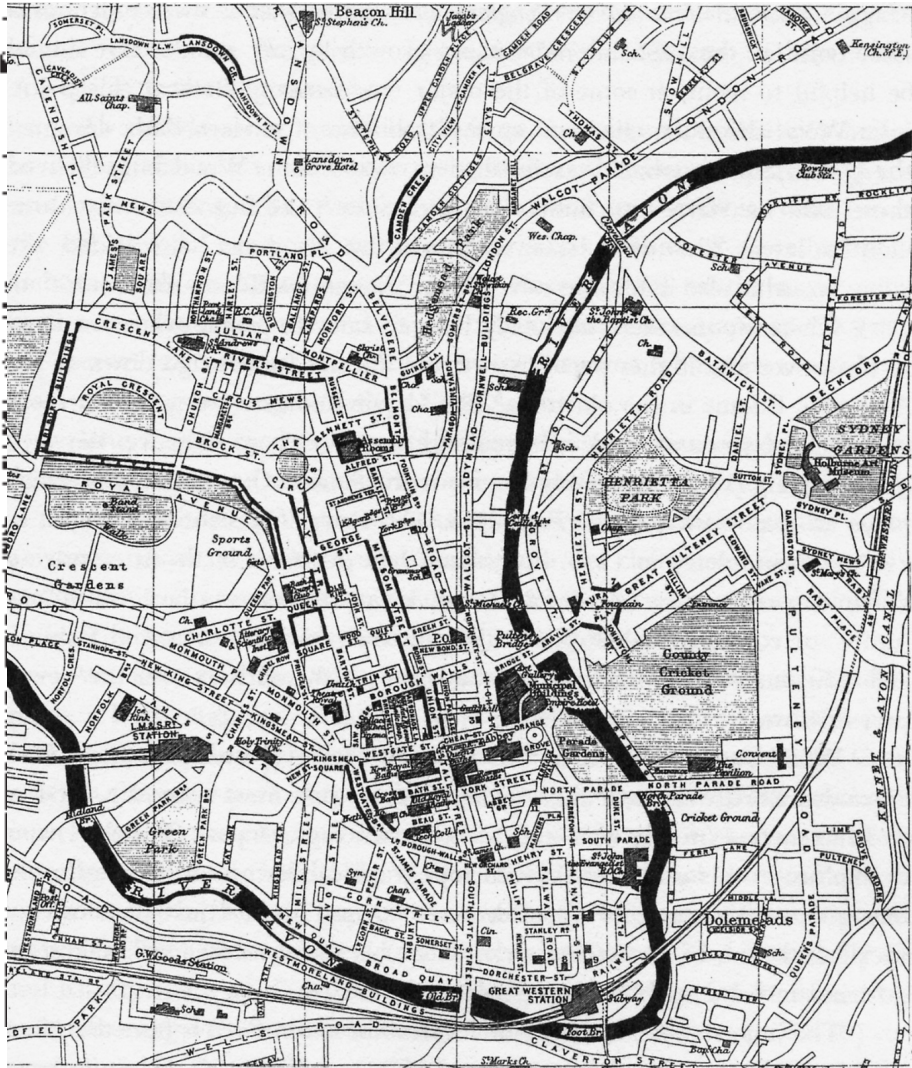


Figure 1: © Bartholomew Ltd. 1945. Reproduced by Kind Permission of HarperCollins Publishers. (Streets and buildings mentioned in Persuasion are darkened.)

Pump Room (built in 1706), and the baths—the King’s Bath, the Queen’s Bath, the Cross Bath, and the Hot Bath. Outside the Borough Walls there are a few rows of houses to the north and south of the city, but the rest of the area is forest or pasture land as indicated by tree-shaped signs in the map.

From this Medieval town Bath grew northward and uphill, and

Maggie Lane in *Jane Austen's England* (74) states that a thousand houses were built “in the 1790s alone”—rapid growth by any standard. It should be helpful to mention some of the major landmarks of Bath at this point. John Wood the elder, chief among the architects of modern Bath, designed the Queen Square which was finished in 1735.¹ John Wood himself lived there, and he started to build The Circus in 1754 but died only three months later. The work was continued by his son, John Wood the younger, who also built the new Upper Assembly Rooms from 1769 to 1771. These Rooms were obviously built to cater to people who now lived in the newer and higher part of town and did not want to go down to the Assembly Rooms in the old town. The Upper Rooms were naturally more modern and spacious, and reflected eighteenth-century elegance. Between the two wings of the Assembly Rooms is the famous Octagon Room, which plays an important part in *Persuasion*. The Royal Crescent was begun in 1767 and completed in 1775, the year of Jane Austen's birth. After tearing down an existing inn in the old town, Union Street was laid in 1807 to “unite” or connect Stall Street in the old town with the new and fashionable Milsom Street, which forms the main north-south axis in the newer part of town.

What we should note here is that the Medieval walled town of Bath expanded northward and literally upward, as one must ascend a total of over 80 meters (nearly 270 feet) to reach the highest part of Bath. I wish to explore in this essay this special topographical feature of Bath—that as one goes north one goes upward, that “upward” is not just physical but social, and that, in *Persuasion*, a character, his social rank, and his location go hand in hand with the topography of the city.

The importance of where one locates oneself in Bath is hinted at, first by Mrs. Allen in *Northanger Abbey*: “[General Tilney's] lodgings were taken the very day after he left them, Catherine. But no wonder; Milsom-street you know” (*NA* 238), and then by Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove: “[I]f we do go [to Bath], we must be in a good situation—none of your Queen-squares for us!” (*P* 42) Mrs. Musgrove's question to Anne, “[W]hat part of Bath do you think [Sir Walter and Elizabeth] will settle in?” (42), though indifferently asked without expecting any answer, indicates the first question that comes to one's mind on hearing someone is going to Bath. The importance of location in Bath is understandable given the fact that people who went there were, by and large, nobility and gentry who had dignity and reputation to maintain, or the *nouveau riche*

who had wealth to display. The tendency toward snobbishness and ostentation was always the object of Jane Austen's irony, and Bath provided Austen with fertile ground.

As stated earlier, going north from the original walled city means ascending the city streets, whereas going south toward the River Avon means descending. Thus Anne's journey home from the White Hart Inn in the old town to her home at the northern end of town is described as "a toilsome walk to Camden-place" (227). Near the end of the novel, after their reconciliation, Anne and Captain Wentworth "slowly paced the gradual ascent" (241) from Union Street where they met, going northward, the "ascent" being no longer "toilsome" to Anne.

Jane Austen used these special topographic characteristics of Bath to symbolize the actual social hierarchy in *Persuasion*. The city's topography is not just intimately associated with the action and emotion of the novel, as shown above, it is closely integrated with the characters' rank and situation in life. In a word Austen's use of Bath in *Persuasion* is organic. The entire city becomes a metaphor for the society she portrays.

We note that Sir Walter chooses "a very good house in Camden-place, a lofty, dignified situation, such as becomes a man of consequence" (137) as his temporary lodgings in Bath. Camden-place (now Camden Crescent) in the early part of the nineteenth century was nearly the northernmost point of the city, in other words, at nearly the *highest* point of its elevation. From this height Sir Walter could literally look down on almost everyone else in Bath, an important consideration for a man to whom rank, "the place he held in society" (4), mattered so much. Understandably he and Elizabeth are much satisfied with this location. Maggie Lane has noted in *A Charming Place—Bath in the Life and Times of Jane Austen* (38-40) the symbolism in the choice of Camden-place for the economically shaky baronet—it was built on shaky ground and the building project could not be completed.

And what of the other characters? Lady Russell locates herself on Rivers-street, which is farther down on the map² but slightly north of, or higher than, the Royal Crescent and The Circus. This location, "high" enough but not as high as the Elliots' apartments, must be regarded as suitable for "the widow of only a knight" (11) who has a healthy respect for Sir Walter's ranking of baronet. Sir Walter would not have condoned her occupying a "higher" spot on the map than himself.

As to Admiral and Mrs. Croft's lodgings in Bath, Sir Walter is anx-

ious that they “be situated in such a part of Bath as it might suit Miss Elliot and himself to visit in” (165). Eventually the Crofts find accommodation “perfectly to Sir Walter’s satisfaction” (168). The location in question is Gay Street. It branches off The Circus southward as far as Queen Square. It is still farther “down” in the city, but not so far down that it would be a source of embarrassment for Sir Walter and Elizabeth to visit, and not so “high” as to make the address too close for comfort. Sir Walter’s thoughts upon choosing Admiral Croft as the tenant of Kellynch Hall, “the admiral’s situation in life . . . was just high enough, and not too high” (24), finds a resonance here. Asked if they should present the Crofts to their august relations the Dalrymples in Laura Place, Elizabeth Elliot answers, “Oh! no, I think not. . . . We had better leave the Crofts to find their own *level*” (166, my emphasis). The “level” Elizabeth talks of can apply geographically as well as socially. As I have stated geography and social rank go hand in hand in *Persuasion*.

It is a matter of course that Sir Walter looks with utter contempt on Mrs. Smith of Westgate Buildings, located as they are at the low end of Bath. Both the names “Smith” and “Westgate Buildings” spell for Sir Walter the utmost disgrace. That Mrs. Smith took the lodgings in Westgate Buildings because they are close to the baths does not weigh at all with Sir Walter, to whom location is the criterion for his judgment along with personal appearance and social rank: “Westgate-buildings! . . . and who is Miss Anne Elliot to be visiting in Westgate-buildings?—A Mrs. Smith. A widow Mrs. Smith. . . . Upon my word, Miss Anne Elliot, you have the most extraordinary taste! Every thing that revolts other people, *low company* (my emphasis), paltry rooms, foul air, disgusting associations are inviting to you” (157).

How radiantly contrasted to Sir Walter’s way of thinking is the unfailing optimism of Mrs. Smith, whom Jane Austen describes as having “that elasticity of mind, . . . the choicest gift of Heaven” (154). Here one notes an important contrast between “a foolish, spendthrift baronet, who had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him” (248) and a widow with physical disabilities and economic restraints who makes the most of what Heaven provides. The religious undertone in the descriptions of Sir Walter wasting what “Providence” has granted him and Mrs. Smith making the most of what “Heaven” bestows extends to Anne, who traverses the entire length of Bath, north to south, to visit Mrs. Smith:

Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy, could never have passed along the streets of Bath, than Anne was sporting with from Camden-place to Westgate-buildings. It was almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way (192).

Here the musings of love talked of is Anne's love for Captain Wentworth. Because of its rhetoric we may suspect Jane Austen of poking fun at Anne's expense. Nevertheless, the tone is sincere enough. What interests us is that Anne's journey is from the worldliness of Camden-place to the poverty-stricken but internally more resourceful world of Mrs. Smith. The phrase "purification and perfume" reminds one of the episode of Mary, sister of Martha, who anointed Jesus with ointment. The journey away from Camden-place may well be described as one of purification, not for others but for Anne herself. How ironic that the journey in fact is a "downward" one! Another bit of irony is seen in the eventual fortunes of Sir Walter and Mrs. Smith respectively. The widow recovers her deceased husband's assets through the exertions of Captain Wentworth and is restored to respectability as well as a measure of health, but we have, at the end of the novel, no hint of Sir Walter's ever saving enough money to return to Kellynch Hall. These two individuals represent the two poles of the world of Bath that are overturned at the end of the story. It makes one think of a Shakespearean Wheel of Fortune.

Add to this the fact that Anne demonstrates an extraordinary thoughtfulness in getting off Lady Russell's carriage a short way before it reaches Westgate Buildings. Sir Walter exclaims, "Westgate-buildings must have been rather surprised by the appearance of a carriage drawn up near its pavement!" (157-58), but in fact "Lady Russell . . . was most happy to convey her as near to Mrs. Smith's lodgings in Westgate-buildings, as Anne chose to be taken" (153). Anne has the forethought not to embarrass Mrs. Smith with the appearance of a carriage which would emphasize the difference in their present circumstances—a degree of consideration which cannot be dreamt of by the vainglorious baronet.

Now that we have examined the "ups" and "downs" of the locations of some of the major characters in Bath, we should consider a few additional groups of characters and their locations.³ The first is the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple and her daughter, the Honourable Miss Carteret, who take "a house . . . in Laura-place, and would be living in style" (149). One sees from the map that Laura Place is situated across the River Avon,

that is across the city proper, and reached via Pulteney Bridge. It is a square set at an angle to the street, with a fountain at the center. Why did Jane Austen choose this location for the Dalrymples? For one thing, it is a grand enough place for a viscountess. Maggie Lane tells us that houses in Laura Place “had the unusual advantage of two water closets” (*A Charming Place* 28). Having Sir Walter located at nearly the highest point on the map, and Landsdown Crescent, still higher up, used as the lodgings of the friends of Mr. Elliot where he is invited to dine, one cannot name a “higher” spot without going outside the city proper. Also Laura Place across the river symbolizes the Dalrymples’ standoffishness, amply implied by the sycophantic attitudes of the Elliots toward them. The location also marks their relative isolation from the rest of the characters. Lady Dalrymple is known at least once to hold a benefit concert—the scene of so much emotion for both Anne and Captain Wentworth—but, excepting that, she and her daughter are outside the main action of the story. Their activities such as evening card parties are reported second-hand. They do not interact with the characters who concern us the most, Anne and Captain Wentworth. As well, it may signify that Lady Dalrymple is *outside* the mainstream of the English hierarchy because her aristocracy is that of Ireland.⁴

The other party on the “sideline” is Colonel and Mrs. Wallis who live in Marlborough Buildings. Mr. Elliot, when he wants to re-establish a relationship with Sir Walter, uses his friend Colonel Wallis as a go-between to communicate to the baronet the extenuating circumstances of his first marriage (although Mrs. Smith later exposes these to be quite literally a pack of lies). And what is it that makes it possible for the Colonel to gain acceptance with the class-conscious baronet?—that he is “living in very good style in Marlborough Buildings” (139), and that his wife is “said to be an excessively pretty woman” (141), both reported by Mr. Elliot in a mixture of lies and flattery. The baronet himself considers Colonel Wallis to be “not an ill-looking man” (139), and foolishly makes a point of emphasizing Mrs. Wallis’s beauty, “Mrs. Wallis, the beautiful Mrs. Wallis” (145), even before he has ever set eyes on her. Here again, location and good looks have the upper hand on sensible judgment in Sir Walter’s mind.

Marlborough Buildings extend from north to south, to the west of the Royal Crescent. An open field behind the building in Jane Austen’s day, which has become Royal Victoria Park in more recent times, provides an unobstructed view at the back. Thus Marlborough Buildings are situated

at nearly the north-western end of the main part of the city. As the building is on the same *level* as the Royal Crescent and The Circus, one can see that it is considered quite a respectable location. These are the circumstances that satisfy Sir Walter, to whom prestigious location was as important as good looks and rank.

And now what about Mr. Elliot? Whereabouts in Bath does he live? The answer is, simply, we do not know. There are a few passages in the text that mention Mr. Elliot and Colonel Wallis together. But, whereas the colonel and his wife are repeatedly identified with Marlborough Buildings, and aside from the fact that Mr. Elliot and Colonel Wallis are very close friends (one might say “co-conspirators”), there is not a single direct statement that Mr. Elliot also lives in Marlborough Buildings, or in fact, in any specific building or on any specific street. A phrase like “Mr. Elliot, and his friends in Marlborough Buildings” (141)—the comma here is significant—makes clear rather that he did *not* live in Marlborough Buildings. Also the fact that Mr. Elliot “had made a point of leaving Colonel Wallis early” (158) in order to fulfill his engagement with the Dalrymples suggests that he was only visiting Colonel Wallis and *not* living in the same building. The phrase “the secrets of Marlborough-buildings” (205), referring to a possible marriage between Anne and Mr. Elliot, indicates only confidential talk between the Colonel and his wife and nothing more.

I should digress at this point to recall a passage near the conclusion of *Persuasion*. After Anne’s conversation with Captain Harville at the White Hart Inn, and Captain Wentworth’s urgent letter to Anne, Charles Musgrove is taking Anne home when Captain Wentworth catches up with them on Union Street. An instant understanding is established between Anne and Wentworth, and, as Charles Musgrove conveniently leaves them at this point, Wentworth now accompanies Anne home. Although they are supposed to be heading for Camden-place, they decide to go “towards the comparatively quiet and retired gravel-walk” (240) for a heart-to-heart talk. Kirsten Elliott refers to this episode in *A Window on Bath* and comments that this is a “most enormous detour!” (46). As the Gravel Walk is to the south of the extensive field in front of the Royal Crescent, the route they take becomes, after a certain point (say, the top of Milsom Street), quite opposite to where Anne should be directing her steps. This episode highlights that Anne is not anxious to go home to her father’s house and stresses the self-absorption of the reunited lovers to be alone with each other—points of emphasis which may be lost on the reader without a

knowledge of the geography of Bath. As well, it symbolizes Anne's determination not to belong to her father's world but to create a world of her own with Wentworth.

Returning to Mr. Elliot's exact address, then, on Anne's first day at Camden-place, he drops in on the Elliots at ten o'clock at night—an unusually late hour for dropping in—after a dinner at Lansdown Crescent (which, as mentioned already, is one of the few buildings located even “higher” up in the city, to the north-west of Camden-place). Is it true, as Sir Walter and company thought, that he is stopping “*in his way home*, to ask them how they did” (142, my emphasis), or is he making an “enormous detour” in his watchfulness over Sir Walter? We might have known the answer to this question if we knew exactly where he lived. But we cannot. I find it fascinating that Jane Austen, who, in *Persuasion*, is meticulously schematic in the placement of her characters in Bath, as outlined already, does not identify Mr. Elliot's lodgings or street. Surely Sir Walter and Elizabeth, whose frequent mention of “our cousins in Laura-place” rings in our ears, could have referred to their other cousin with the name of his lodgings or street at some point in the story. But we have no such luck. This silence on the part of Austen regarding Mr. Elliot's exact location marks a stark contrast to the Dalrymples who are, as mentioned above, constantly named in the same breath with Laura Place and the Colonel and Mrs. Wallis with Marlborough Buildings, or, for that matter, Mrs. Smith with Westgate Buildings.

The case also differs sharply from that of Captain Wentworth, whose address is never directly stated but is clearly understood to be on Gay Street with his relations the Crofts. It is Admiral Croft who first talks to Anne, “I think we must get [Frederick Wentworth] to Bath. . . . we had better try to get him to Bath” (173). At the climactic scene at the White Hart Inn, Mrs. Croft says:

“Here, Frederick, you and I part company, I believe. . . . I am going home, and you have an engagement with your friend.—To-night we may have the pleasure of all meeting again, at your party,” (turning to Anne.) “We had your sister's card yesterday, and I understood Frederick had a card too, though I did not see it—and you are disengaged, Frederick, are you not, as well as ourselves?” (236)

This speech makes clear that Mrs. Croft and her brother Captain Wentworth had set out together this particular morning to visit the Musgroves and Captain Harville at the White Hart, that Elizabeth Elliot's

invitation card was received by everyone concerned the day before, but Captain Wentworth did not bother to “display” it, unlike Sir Walter who placed Lady Dalrymple’s cards “wherever they might be most visible” (149). However, Wentworth did mention the receipt of Elizabeth Elliot’s card to his sister, and Mrs. Croft is counting on going to the party with her husband the admiral and her brother Captain Wentworth. In the reconciliation scene on Union Street that follows immediately afterwards, Charles Musgrove asks, “Captain Wentworth, which way are you going? only to Gay-street, or farther up the town?” (240). All these speeches make clear that Captain Wentworth is staying with the Crofts on Gay Street.

Such, however, is not the case with Mr. Elliot. The speeches we examined earlier concerning Mr. Elliot and Marlborough Buildings only muddy the question. Why is there such a lack of information on Mr. Elliot’s exact location in Bath?

I believe this lack of identification by street or building symbolizes the enigma that is Mr. Elliot. From the moment her father and sister mention his name upon her arrival in Bath, Anne cannot reconcile between what she knows of his past behavior and what they tell her of his present conduct. In spite of the fact that he expresses all the right opinions, there is something opaque about him: Anne “could not be satisfied that she really knew his character” (160). In fact his “real character” (199), as Mrs. Smith calls it, is hidden from everyone until she exposes it. Anne rightly suspects that there is, with Mr. Elliot, “something more than immediately appeared” (140). Austen typically sums this all up by stating he is “not open” (161). It is apt, then, that Mr. Elliot remains a person of “address unknown.” It is a perfect metaphor for this “disingenuous, artificial, worldly” man (208). Jane Austen was being quite subtle in not mentioning exactly where he lives. His unknown address is a symbol of the mask he wears.⁵

Seen in this way, the whole of Bath is revealed as a metaphor for society at large, where a spendthrift baronet whose first concerns are looks and rank sits at the top, and “a mere Mrs. Smith, an every day Mrs. Smith” (158) spends her days gainfully employed, albeit in a humble way, reduced in status to a place at the bottom. When Anne refuses to join the other three Elliots at the Dalrymples’ party in order to keep a promise with Mrs. Smith, she dares to identify herself with the seemingly lowly people. Behind this beautiful, at times painful, but ultimately satisfying love story between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth, we sense Jane Austen’s questioning gaze going beyond the two central figures to larger social issues.

NOTES

1. For all the factual information on buildings and dates mentioned in my paper I should like to credit collectively the books listed in WORKS CONSULTED. Not only is such information contained in several of the books and publications I consulted, it is readily available in Encyclopedias and like publications. My problem for crediting each individual book or publication is compounded by the fact that, for example, I found the date that one building was begun stated in one book and the date it was finished in another.
2. The map is taken from *Ward, Lock's Illustrated Guide Book* on Bath, and is reproduced by the kind permission of HarperCollins Publishers. I am also indebted to Bartholomew Ltd., the owner of the copyright. I have darkened the streets and buildings mentioned in this paper for easier identification.
3. I shall exclude from my discussion the Musgroves and Captain Harville who stay at the White Hart Inn in the old town as they are visitors and not residents. The White Hart Inn is important, of course, as the spot from which Mary Musgrove spies Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Clay at their double game under the Colonnade, the first tangible evidence of their treachery.
4. Linda Bree, in a footnote to her edition of *Persuasion*, mentions that the Irish nobility were often regarded socially inferior to the English and Scottish nobility. She comments on the satire on Sir Walter, who, situated between the English nobility and gentry (45), is thrown into fits of agitation over the less superior Irish aristocracy (170).
5. To my knowledge no one has attached any significance to this lack of information on Mr. Elliot's exact location in Bath. Maggie Lane simply states, "[W]e are not given an address for [Mr. Elliot]" and surmises: "Almost certainly . . . Anne Elliot's cousin William . . . chose to stay in one of the hotels in Bath" (Lane, *A Charming Place* 21). If Mr. Elliot was staying in a hotel in Bath, Jane Austen, if she intended to, would have mentioned the name of the hotel, especially since she clearly names the hotel where the Musgroves and Captain Harville were staying. Thus, the mystery of Mr. Elliot's exact location in Bath remains even if he were staying in a hotel.

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