

**A VISIT TO IVANHOE BATHS
ASHBY-DE-LA-ZOUCH
By Paul Pry Junior in 1826**



**IVANHOE BATHS ON THE BATH GROUNDS, ASHBY-DE-LA-ZOUCH
(Photograph, copyright of the originator)**

BY SAMUEL T STEWART - SEPTEMBER 2024

PREFACE

IVANHOE BATHS

Between 1800 – 1817 following the discovery of a saline spring at Moira's 'Bath Pit' a couple of miles from Ashby, the Rawdon Hastings family established a small scale baths in Moira.

In 1818 – 1819, the lack of inns and lodgings in Moira together with the proximity of a mine shaft led to the decision to transfer the brine waters to Ashby de la Zouch.

In 1822 funding by the town and Francis Rawdon Hastings Esq allowed the building of the Ivanhoe baths. The Baths designed by the architect Robert Chaplin were built for the princely sum of £16,000.

Originally transported by canal and later by rail to the new Ivanhoe Baths, the mineral water was stored in an underground brick Reservoir capable of filling 2000 baths.

In Ashby, you could 'take the waters' as a medicinal drink or 'be totally immersed in water or sponged in the problem area.'

Application of the water was either 'as a flow, in the steam bath, through a tube directing it to a particular spot on the bather's person' or 'as rain, in the shower bath, where its activity is thrilling and diffusive over the head and shoulders.'

An impressive fountain played in front of the building at one time.

Ashby failed to gain the fashionable status needed to succeed as a spa town and the baths closed in March 1884 due to a lack of patronage, and the end came in 1962 when the beautiful neoclassical building was finally demolished. The Royal Hotel was built in 1827 to accommodate the rapidly increasing visitor numbers to the spa.

Remnants of the spa building remain visible within the Grounds, including stone fragments from the columns, pediments and cornices.

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THE MYSTERIOUS MR. PAUL PRY

So, who was Paul Pry who wrote the newspaper article about his visit to the Ivanhoe Baths in 1826 on the following page? No one seems to know!! My own view is that he was a traveller and writer of little distinction who was known to have visited Ashby and the adjacent area on at least two occasions. The newspaper article suggests that he wrote a journal, which the article was extracted from.

Numerous public houses around the country were, and some still are, named "Paul Pry", and the farm at Ropers Hill, Staunton Harold incorporated an Ale House named "Paul Pry" in the early 1800s. Could this have been named after Paul Pry following a visit there during his travels in the locality, who knows, but it is doubtful. The popular theory is that the name 'Paul Pry' attached to public houses, originates from the play called "**Paul Pry**" (1825), a farce in three acts, written by 19th-century English playwright John Poole. It premiered in London on 13 September 1825 at the Haymarket Theatre and ran 114 performances. The play continued to be popular until the early 1870s. In the play, Paul Pry was cast as a busybody, unable to mind his own business. The name stuck and has applied to eavesdroppers and busybodies ever since.

A part extract from the Leicester Journal - August 8th 1845 related to the 'Paul Pry' at Staunton Harold

Elizabeth Edwards sworn - Keeps the "Paul Pry" public-house at Staunton Harold, about six miles from Donington. Was called up about five o'clock on the morning of 5th June by the prisoner Hood, and another man, whom she did not know. They stayed about an hour and a half. Hood had a small handkerchief tied upon his head. Some conversation took place about buying a hat for Hood, and it was agreed that they should buy one at Ashby. After they were gone she missed an old cloth cap.

Cross examined by Mr. Willmore - Knew Hood but nether of the others. They said they cam from Castle Donington and were Hawkers.

Edward Wright, sworn - Keeps the Ashby Lane Toll gate, situate about two miles from the Pal Pry public house ; the gate is about a mile from Ashby. Was at work on the morning of 5th June on the road. Dixon, Oldershaw, and Hood passed him between six and seven, going in the direction of Ashby. Hood had a small blue cap on.....

Having spent a considerable time trying to find out more about the mysterious Paul Pry, nothing has been found to confirm that he had anything to do with the play Paul Pry or the public houses of that name.

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Transcribed from the Leicester Chronicle - Saturday 5th August 1826

IVANHOE BATHS

EXTRACTS FROM THE JOURNAL OF PAUL PRY JUN., ESQ.

Mr. Editor,

My father, who is *prying* into all the curiosities of Paris and furnishing the English papers with remarks on all he sees, happened a short time ago to be introduced to a celebrated French nobleman, who has lately made the tour of this country. After some desultory conversation, the subject turned to English watering places. Bath, Buxton, Cheltenham, and all were mentioned, and all more or less praised. "But why", said the Count, "do you omit the name of one which in beauty may vie with many, and in utility with any of those? Why do you omit that pretty midland town, with name half Saxon, and half French?" My father was at a loss.—"Je n'entends pas. Monsieur le Comte." "I mean," said the Frenchman, "that recently discovered watering place which has the remarkable advantage of a coast town in the heart of the country.—(Une mer interieure)—I mean Ashby—Ashby-de-la-Zouch."

My father had never beard of such a watering-place, even in England, and wondered at finding a foreigner acquainted with it. "That is case with too many of your countrymen," said the Count, "or it would be better attended; for, either a curiously, agreeable temporary retreat, or a place of great utility to invalids, it is well worth a visit."

Such a conversation could not but make us (the Frys') anxious to see Ashby; and my father requested me to take it on route from Paris to Edinburgh. I have done so; and behold a few notes from my journal.

Thursday, July 4.—I arrived this evening at Ashby. The town is situated on the western border of Leicestershire, between Charnwood Forest and the Wolds. I engaged private lodgings (and excellent they were) at Mr. L.'s. Female society, and not "lodgings let," was my inducement. Full of curiosity (from which, indeed, our family derives its name), I hastened to the baths. I entered the beautiful "approach." What was to my surprise, at finding in this hitherto unnoticed place, a building that would not disgrace Sir Christopher Wren. I am a bad describer of architecture, whether pure or mixed, but I know when it pleases; and do not hesitate to say, that the Ashby Baths, both as regards external ornament and internal convenience, are equal to any establishment of the kind I have ever seen. The front of the building (an eastern one) is of stone, the central part is occupied by the Assembly Rooms (admirably designed); the north wing is appropriated to gentlemen; the south to the ladies.

In the gentlemen's department is a swimming bath, which, for elegance and capaciousness, has few equals. A pipe for hot water gives the bather a choice of almost any temperature. The warm baths, dressing rooms, &c., are very commodious. The billiard and lounging rooms are as they ought to be. "But where," said I to the Hebe who attends the ladies, "is the library or the newsroom?"—"There is none. Sir," was the reply. C'est bien dommage," said I, forgetting I was in England. Descending the steps, I met a groupe of my fellow-lodgers. "Will you accompany us round the grounds, Mr. Pry?" said the fairest. "Any where, with such guides," said I. We gained a seat, which gave an angular view of the building.—The grand entrance, in the centre of a noble colonnade, is by a flight of steps. The two minor entrances are approached in the same manner. The whole has a most classical and imposing appearance. **A fountain was playing in the front**—happy pairs promenading round is only wanting for music.

The grounds are well laid out: from a vista at the bottom, a mass of fine ruins meets the eye. "The castle !" said my conductress.—" Ashby castle," and Ivanhoe Walter Scott—the tournament—were in an Instant before me—before mind's eye, at least. Hastings and Scarborough have their castles; Brighton has its pavilion; Matlock has Haddon ; but Ashby has more than they all in this respect - a magnificent ruin, and the author of Waverley for its eulogist—I had almost said, historian. The ruins, seen from the baths, are picturesque in the extreme.

Wednesday Morning.— I hastened to the castle, now gilded by a glorious rising sun. The "court of guard," watch towers, donjon, culinary offices, and the chapel, may still be distinguished. The ivy has nearly covered the little chapel in a mantle of evergreen, enriching the effect luxuriantly. Walking on the terrace, I observed an aged gentleman, who found food for thought here. We were soon familiar. "If you are staying at Ashby," said he, "you should practice the advice of Sir Walter Scott. To-night is the full moon, and," added he,

"He who would visit Melrose aright,
Must do it by the pale moon-light;
For the opening shadows of gaudy day
Gild but to *flout* the ruins grey."

I shall take the hint. —Took a bath this morning. Conversed with several, who were waiting for the troubling of the waters. All agreed that their effect in rheumatism, and several other disorders, was most astonishing. The waters are highly impregnated with saline particles—I was told nine degrees stronger than sea water, to which their taste is very similar. I observed, in the attendant's room, notice of a work on their efficacy, by a physician in this town', shall consult it.

Crossed the Wolds to Moira, the fountain head of the saline spring. These Wolds were the scene of that beautiful fragment, "Sir Bertrand turned his Steed towards the Wolds." The road to Moira is dull and drear as can be imagined ; but, like the African deserts, it has one green spot—the Cottage Inn. Good taste has been there ; I hope success will follow her. Moira has a good inn and lodging-house, neat pleasure barge, and a beautiful lake, called Barrat Water, in which, I believe, visitors at the baths may angle. The salt water spring here is 213 yards from the surface !

Drove this evening to Coleorton Hall, Sir George Beaumont's. Landscape gardening is here seen in perfection, as might be expected at the seat of one so eminent in the fine arts. Here art seems to have taken nature by the hand, hut touched her gently, that she could not perceive it. What a delightful village church is here! That painting of the apostle worthy of the house of God. That tablet in the chancel is worthy of her whose virtues it records —worthy of him who raised it. These verses might render the name of FERMOR immortal, if Pope's had not already done so. I put in practice Sir Walter Scott's advice, and visited the castle by moonlight. It was a lovely scene. The softened light gave such richness, and the tranquil hour such solemnity to it, that it were worth riding fitly miles for the feelings it gave birth to.

Thursday. —Visited Staunton Harold (three miles off). It is the seat of Earl Ferrers, a noble but unfinished house, situated in what the Scotch would call "a glen." It is highly worth noticing. Breedon Rock, crowned by its ancient church, Donington Park, the seat of Lord Hastings, deserved and had our attention; also Willesley, Calke, and Foremark, all residences of distinguished gentlemen, are within very short distance of Ashby.

Friday.— Went to the baths; thence the lounging rooms - not a lounge there ; but the lawn had a few visitors, here a fine girl was reclining with a book —another was trying a sketch of the castle, a third appeared scribbling, perhaps verses. "Well," said I, "Ashby will yet be immortalized !". Went to see the church - outside bad —the interior not so despicable; some monuments are well worthy the notice of the antiquarian. Going down the Market-place, on my return, I was shown the window from whence the Marquis of Hastings made his eloquent speech, on the occasion of his return from India. His Lordship, almost idolised here.

These, Mr. Editor, are a few leaves from my journal. Had I time, and you room, I should send more; but, having pointed out few of the of the beauties of Ashby, and its environs, I must content myself with wishing that the time is not far distant, when it will be as celebrated as it ought to be.

I am, Sir, your very obedient Servant,

PAUL PRY, junior.

Wednesday July 24, 1826.

P.S. I beg to suggest two hints to the proprietors. Establish a news room, for papers and periodical publications and adopt a *fresh* regulation with the swimming baths.

- Vide "Ivanhoe."