



On a warm spring morning, one where the daffodils are finally adding a splash of colour to what has been a long, dark, grey, cold winter, Bridge of Allan is looking its best. The Victorian spa town, two miles from neighbouring Dunblane and six miles from sisterly Stirling, and nestling at the foot of the Ochil Hills, is bright, clean and bursting with vitality. On the streets are elegantly dressed shoppers, young parents with children in prams and a steady stream of Lycra-clad runners pounding the pavements, so insulated by

their earphones as to be oblivious to a rising chorus of bird song.

The entrance to the town is via a slip road; you drive down and then turn left across a stone road bridge that crosses the waters of the Allan, a tributary of the River Forth. In the early 18th century, Bridge of Allan consisted of not much more than a mill and a collection of modest cottages near the bridge. The Old Bridge Inn, built in 1710, remains a reminder of that time, although not too many years ago it underwent an extensive renovation and emerged as Scotland's first dedicated Wagyu beef restaurant, a far

The Spa Town

Since its days as a Victorian spa, Bridge of Allan has welcomed visitors with open arms... and left them revived and refreshed.

BY STEPHEN MCGINTY



Photo © Kerry Hanter



cry from the presumably plain fare of those early days.

I pass the discreet little railway station that delivers commuters to both Edinburgh and Glasgow and which has helped build Bridge of Allan into a property hotspot. It is quiet at this hour, lonely without its 7 a.m. or 7 p.m. populace eagerly heading out or contentedly coming home.

As I begin to drive through the town, I'm first struck by its elegant size — a boy racer in the early hours could tear through its entire length in less than 15 seconds — and, more, its wonderful panoramic views. There is a feeling of space about Bridge of Allan that I can't quite recall seeing in any other town. It's perched on a slight ridge that allows it to look down on the vast

Left: In 2012 a community effort transformed an empty lot in town into Provost Park, a Victorian-inspired public space. Above (top to bottom): A photo circa 1905 of the town's Hydropathic Building; Stone villas and commercial buildings line Henderson Street around 1890–1900.

plains and arable countryside that sweeps all the way to where Stirling sits, imperious, with the castle perched on an ancient stone peak.

Find a parking space on Henderson Street, which runs through the centre of the town, a bisecting line that casts the most exclusive neighbourhoods to the north. At the very edge of Bridge of Allan is the sprawling estate of Stirling University, one of the few universities in Scotland that has a cocooned campus, separate from the town that gives it its name. It houses a renowned library, sports facilities, arts centre and theatre. Students are frequent visitors to Bridge of Allan, but, by all accounts, resist co-opting it as a “college town,”



Photo © Fote Ouzia

and so the area retains its own reputation for quiet elegance, a projection of “the good life” on villas of warm honeyed stone.

Not far from the university is the popular Pullar Memorial Park, attractive gardens that are home to the town’s war memorial. The park offers long views toward the Wallace Monument and is welcoming to walkers any time of year, but it is particularly beautiful in spring when the outer avenues are in full blossom. In an admirable display of civic pride, it is maintained entirely by local volunteers.

I wanted to start my visit by quickly reconnecting with nature. The drive here wasn’t long, but after a week in the city, the prospect of immersing oneself in greenery was appealing. A two-minute walk from my parking space and I was heading down to the riverbank and gazing across to a copse of trees on the other side.

A charming riverside pathway called the Darn Walk follows the river for three miles to Dunblane where it is then possible, if one wishes a bit of pampering, to board a train for the return journey to Bridge of Allan. The path is said to have been in use since Roman times and is associated with Robert Louis Stevenson, who included the route in *Kidnapped*.

My visit held the prospect of a forest walk later in the day, so I was content to remain here by the water’s edge. While the current of the Allan was meandering, it had just enough movement to entertain the eye and still the soul and after a few minutes I headed back up onto the main thoroughfare.

The history of Bridge of Allan is rather fascinating. In the 12th century, ownership of the area that is now the town was the cause of an unholy row between nuns in North Berwick and a group of monks based at Dunfermline Abbey. Four centuries later in 1520, a narrow stone bridge was built to replace an

It was designed by the legendary Alexander “Greek” Thomson, which is evident in its characteristically elaborate gilded base.

old ford that crossed the River Allan, and the first cottages soon followed. The populace grew when valuable deposits of gold, silver and copper were discovered in the wooded area above the bridge and a mine was opened.

Over the next few centuries there were minor incidents of note, such as in 1745

when more than 300 Jacobites descended on the town and set up a roadblock on the bridge to collect tolls during what was hoped to be the glorious revolution that would return the House of Stuart to the throne.

Yet it was not until the 19th century that Bridge of Allan became the cynosure of all eyes, or at least those looking for a healing balm. Prior to the bold plans of Major Alexander Henderson, the laird of Westerton, Bridge of Allan was a small backwater. The major, however, had other plans and in 1850 began laying out a new town with wide boulevards, which were soon lined with stone villas.

The timing was impeccable. Just as Bridge of Allan was rising up to middle and upper class gentrification, the nation was becoming obsessed with the latest

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Above: The Paterson Memorial Clock stands in front of the Westerton Arms pub on Henderson Street. Opposite (clockwise, beginning at top): Pullar Memorial Park was created in 1923 to honor local sons lost in the First World War; The Allan Water Cafe; A waterwheel on this events venue in town hints at its past life; The former Museum Hall on Henderson Street is now luxury housing; The gently flowing Allan Water.

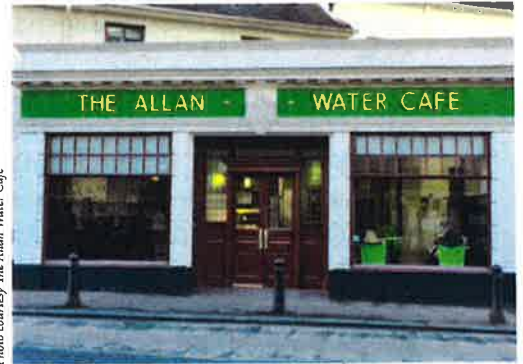
Photo © Doug Lee



Photo © Raymond Dornier



Photo courtesy The Allan Water Cafe



The park offers long views toward the Wallace Monument and is particularly beautiful in spring when the outer avenues are in full blossom.



Photo © Raymond Dornier



Spa Town, continued from page 60

Victorian health fad of hydrotherapy, and the town, with its mineral-rich water, became one of Britain's most popular spas. The villas were quickly adapted as guest houses and for decades the great, the good and the lame visited Bridge of Allan to take "water cures." By 1830, an estimated 30,000 visitors came annually, including wealthy Victorian families from Glasgow and Edinburgh who built or bought holiday properties in the village. Among the regulars were Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson, who visited annually as a young man.

When you walk down Henderson Street today, or take a stroll around the memorial park, it's hard to imagine the throng of international visitors who took such delight in the town's setting and its pioneering spas where water of various temperatures had the ability to cure ailments and restore health, or so the willing participants believed. In nearby Stirling, the Smith Art Gallery displays the only remaining bottle of Bridge of Allan Mineral Water, once prized by so many and now a curious artifact.

Today, Bridge of Allan is not without its attractions. The town has a number of culinary institutions that visitors would be ill advised to ignore. Before I even reach the Allan Water Cafe, I can feel the buzz. Looking through the windows I can see that almost every table is occupied with couples, both young and old, and larger groups of extended families. The cafe is a town favourite, having been owned and run by the same Italian family for four generations. While it serves takeout fish suppers and mountainous ice creams, I preferred to wait for a table and order a celebrated fish tea — fish supper, bread and butter and a pot of tea. As I waited for it to arrive, I fell into conversation with an elderly couple at the next table who explained that this was their weekly visit — same day, same time, same order. "We're here about 50 weeks of the year. The only time we don't visit is when we go on holiday, and even then, we miss it." As if this wasn't advertisement enough, the fish tea was a delight: crisp but succulent

batter, fat cod, chips (just the right size) and the tea, strong and hot.

For those whose thirst requires something stronger than tea, an innovative microbrewery tucked behind the Queen's Hotel, just off Henderson Street, fits the bill. The Allanwater Brewhouse offers tours, tastings, a cozy bar, food and live music. Self-described as Scotland's smallest commercial brewery, they have a rotating lineup of pours on tap, including a number of ciders.

Another worthwhile stop on Henderson Street is the Paterson Memorial Clock, erected in 1898 by public subscription to honor Dr. Alexander Paterson's service to the town, and a favored meeting place. It was designed by the legendary Alexander "Greek" Thomson, which is evident in its characteristically elaborate gilded base.

It was time to venture north of the main road and to wander around the villas and fine homes that have so established the town as an affluent commuter hub for Glasgow and Edinburgh. The weather was turning out to be unusually generous, with bright shafts of sunlight breaking through the occasional clouds. This area of Bridge of Allan is a pleasant place to stroll. I made my way higher and higher up the hill as I passed rather beautiful houses set on wide streets lined with trees. I discovered that one of the old spa hotels has now been converted into luxury apartments, with one part housing the town's celebrated Italian restaurant Vecchia Bologna.

The longer one spends in Bridge of Allan, the stronger the appeal — which has to include the remarkable host of attractions on its doorstep. Less than 20 minutes by car are the lions and tigers and bears of Blair Drummond Safari Park; the Wallace Monument is just up the road; Stirling, with its castle and assorted attractions, is less than four miles away; and ballet performances, theatrical classics and the latest art house movies are performed and screened at the MacRobert Arts Centre on the nearby campus of Stirling University.

For those with a fine palate and a taste for good wines, there is WoodWinters, a popular and impeccably priced wine

store. And should the Vecchia Bologna not satisfy one's taste for Italian cuisine, there is Cafe 33 a little further down Henderson Street; the recipes hail from the Lazio region south of Rome, as do the cafe's owners.

At the top of the town is a woodland popular with residents who enjoy forest walks with or without their menagerie of dogs and, sometimes, with horses. Stepping from the road and pavement to the slightly muddy path was a pleasant change of pace and scenery. The stone homes were now behind me and what lay ahead was a canopy of green, the sky making an occasional appearance between thickets of branches.

In the woods I began to appreciate the benefits of Bridge of Allan and why it proved so popular to a generation of Victorians: it is surrounded by nature — the waters of the Allan, woodlands and the vast expanse of what would have been farmland. There is a gentleness to the landscape. It is nature denuded of danger, nature carefully corralled, nature on its best behaviour.

The walk was invigorating and as I looped round the woods and began heading back into town I began to ponder where Bridge of Allan had been all my life...no doubt, quietly waiting for our first encounter. ■

FURTHER INFORMATION

The University of Stirling offers friends and prospective students a variety of ways to explore the campus, from an online virtual tour to self-guided and group tours. Visit www.stir.ac.uk/study/visit-us for details. For a listing of events and exhibitions at the MacRobert Arts Centre, refer to their Web site at www.macrobertartscentre.org.

Information on the Darn Walk along the Allan Water to Dunblane can be found at www.walkhighlands.co.uk/fife-stirling/darn-walk.shtml.

A listing of restaurants in Bridge of Allan can be found at www.bridgeofallan.com, including Allan Water Cafe (www.allanwatercafe.co.uk), Allanwater Brewhouse (www.allanwaterbrewhouse.co.uk), Vecchia Bologna (www.vecchiabologna.co.uk) and Cafe 33 (www.facebook.com/cafe33bofa). The Grill by HW (www.hwgrill.co.uk) occupies the former Old Bridge Inn building (circa 1700s) at 2 Inverallan Road, Bridge of Allan.