

John Wood in Queen Square, Bath

The City of Bath is my favourite place and I return to the city whenever the opportunity arises.

There is no better way to start a day in Bath than enjoying a bun and coffee at Sally Lunn's tea house in North Parade Alley, formerly Lilliput Alley. There's been an eating house on this site since 1680 and the bun, which is part bun part cake, is still baked to a secret recipe. Suitably refreshed, it's time to walk to Queen Square passing the Roman Baths, Pump Room, and Cross Bath.

John Wood the Elder (1704 – 1754) had risen to fame early as an architect with his London street designs as well as work in Yorkshire. Initially, Wood was influenced by Wren, but soon took on an approach more aligned to Palladio. In 1727, Wood was invited by Richard "Beau" Nash (1674 – 1762) and Ralph Allen (1693 – 1764) to submit designs for an urban expansion of Bath, then a rather seedy rundown spa town. Nash allegedly provided some of the finance for the building of Georgian Bath from gambling taxes. Nash also provided an arena for pleasure and intrigue for the fashionable wealthy by opening assembly rooms such as Harrison and Lindsay's in Grand Parade (rooms now demolished). In contrast, Allen who was a successful national postmaster, opened a quarry on Combe Down to the south of the city, thus providing local Bath stone for building.

Bath stone is a honey coloured limestone that can be cut in any direction without fracturing. This makes Bath stone a true "freestone" allowing for delicate precise carving but remaining tough enough for strength in large building – both combinations can be found throughout Bath on its Georgian buildings.

The building of Queen Square commenced on 10th December 1727 to Wood's specific design. The construction would take eight years to complete. Wood's intention was to level the land at Queen Square; however, the inexpensive use of the natural fall of the land was chosen. This decision ensured the north side of Queen Square created a grand façade presiding over the rest of the square and on the north side at number 24, centre of the terrace, we find Wood's house.

Wood's house is unmistakably based on roman classical architecture as seen by Eighteenth Century gentry on their Grand Tour. This style would set the tone for much of the building of Georgian Bath. Rising from a basement which was originally used as a kitchen, the ground floor of number 24 provides a strong base for six columns known as orders topped with ornate Corinthian capitals. Although the parapet is plain, the crowning glory is a vast pediment centrally placed and proportioned to adorn a carved frieze. Three floral urns stretch skyward above the pediment. Servant quarters located in the attic, are masked by an unattractive balustrade.

In the middle of the square, now shrouded in trees, Wood positioned an obelisk inscribed with a tribute to Frederick, Prince of Wales, his consort Princess Augusta, and Nash.