Regency BRIGHTON

Under the influence of the pleasure-loving Prince Regent, Brighton became a jewel of extravagant architecture.

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style is no respecter of monarchs. Brighton may be nigh-on synonymous with the Regency period (1811-20) – it was a seaside retreat for the Prince Regent, the future George IV – but many of its most famous features were completed much later.

“We have to broaden time frames,” says Nick Tyson, curator of the Regency Town House, “thanks to the Great Stop.” Brighton enjoyed an explosion of speculative building in the early 1820s, with many developers borrowing heavily to fund construction. By now, however, the once-fashionable prince had become an unpopular king and, in 1826, the bubble burst. “People went bankrupt,” says Nick. “Many projects started in the 1820s were only completed in the late 1850s.”

Of course that is not how we see Brighton today. Thanks to the efforts of architecture lovers from the 1980s onwards, it is one of the most intact ‘Regency’ towns left and if the dating isn’t pure, the architecture is.

Side streets reveal hints of the loosening of stays Georgians relished when they visited the seaside

We can get a feel of what the town must have been like in its heyday merely by strolling the streets with an enquiring eye. Royal, Hanover, Park and Montpelier crescents remain largely unaltered, and even side streets reveal hints of the loosening of stays Georgians relished when they visited the seaside.

The idea of visiting the sea for one’s health was new, encouraged by the theories of Dr Richard Russell, who advocated bathing in – and drinking – seawater.

When George, Prince of Wales arrived at the sleepy fishing town in 1783, he fell in love. Here, finally, he could indulge his famously hedonistic tastes. By 1787 architect Henry Holland was turning George’s lodgings into Marine Pavilion, a neoclassical villa. It would do for now, but something niggled at the back of the Prince’s mind.

A lover of chinoiserie and horses, he vented his frustrations on glamorous new stables. William Porden’s 1808 fantasy in ‘Indian’

Right: The circular carpet in the Royal Pavilion’s Saloon
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style was fabulous, but the building – now the Brighton Dome museum and music venue – made the prince’s own accommodation look even less exciting. In 1815 he commissioned John Nash to transform Marine Pavilion into an oriental palace.

Nash’s domes, towers and minarets were designed with one purpose: to dazzle visitors from the moment they arrived. Frederick Crace and Robert Jones were charged with decorating every inch of the new pavilion in outrageous, curlicued sensory overload. A confection of ‘Indian’ and ‘Chinese’ whimsy, by the time George was crowned in 1820 the new royal residence had no equal in opulent luxury. It included the latest innovations: piped water, flushing WCs, gas lighting and enough kitchen tech to tempt top chef Marie-Antonin Carême from France. From an intimidatingly long entrance hall to several mighty reception and dining rooms, the palace’s sheer richness of colour, gilding, lustre and ornamentation was overwhelming, and everyone wanted a piece of it.

In London Society, formal introductions had to be made before a person could even speak to someone else. At the seaside, however, people interacted more naturally, at the races, in lending libraries and at parties. “It greased the social system,” notes Nick Tyson. Wherever the ‘ton’ (fashionable elite) went, so did the developers, building assembly rooms such as the Old Ship (now a hotel), churches like St Stephen’s and the Doric-columned Unitarian church, and private residences. In one or two instances, as with the Western Pavilion – a joyful miniature version of the royal summer house off Western Road – imaginations let rip, but in most instances cool neoclassicism ruled the day.

As land became scarce in the town centre, satellite developments sprang up including, to the east, Thomas Kemp’s Kemptown and, to the west, Charles Busby’s Brunswick Estate. Designed as a self-contained conurbation, Brunswick had large, sea-facing houses for the gentry, middle-sized and smaller homes
for professionals and artisans, as well as its own chapel, bathhouses, pubs, shops and covered market.

George slipped from popularity, however, as his subjects became disgusted by the decadence they had once admired. Aware of their disdain, the overweight, depressed king had a secret tunnel built under the Pavilion gardens so he could visit his beloved horses without being seen – or laughed at – by the mob. Fashionable society looked away.

After George’s death in 1830, Brighton slipped further from grace. The new railways brought fewer wealthy visitors to the seaside and although the general public came for summer holidays, easily missing the elite’s autumn/winter ‘Season’, the town was no longer the exclusive playground of the rich.

William IV used the Pavilion occasionally, but it was too small and self-indulgent for Queen Victoria, who stripped the building and sold it to the city for demolition. The town fell into poverty and, by the 1960s and 70s, was one of the most deprived areas in Britain. High-class residences were subdivided into tenements and quietly moulder, though with no one wealthy enough to ‘improve’ them, they remained largely unaltered.

The 1980s saw a sea-change as people began to recognise the town’s historic beauty. In 1984 Nick Tyson began a labour of love, buying up flats in No. 13, Brunswick Square as they became available, intending to restore the townhouse to its original Regency splendour as authentically as possible.

The Brunswick Town Charitable Trust was formed in 1992 and now around 200 volunteers, aged 16-94, work on the Regency Townhouse project. The first, unglamorous job – to make the place structurally sound – is complete and it is now possible for visitors to enjoy the house, upstairs and downstairs, as it is conserved.

With harmony in mind, Charles Busby made the facades of his new town alike. Inside, however, clients could choose their own decorative options from catalogues, making each one unique. The Trust’s treasure hunt to discover what, exactly, No. 13’s occupants chose from that book, is now yielding results, a fascinating example of how Regency Brighton is being renovated, building by building.

And the Pavilion? Oddly, given it was sold for redevelopment, the building almost instantly discovered a new life, as a ‘people’s palace’. Renovations – some appropriate, others less so – began in Victorian times and continue even now, the latest dazzling accomplishment a jewel-bright, circular carpet in the Saloon. Today, Regency Brighton gleams as richly as it ever did.