

Gainsborough in Bath

High Society and the Bath Season

"In Bath I do this and I do that, and I do nothing, and I go here and go there and go nowhere. Such is ye life of Bath and the effects of this place that I forget my cares and everything."

David Garrick, actor and friend of Gainsborough



When Thomas Gainsborough moved to Bath in 1758 it was a bustling cosmopolitan spa centre experiencing a phenomenal building boom, attracting nobility and wealthy merchants alike, and described by Mrs Delany at the time as ‘the busiest idle place in the world’. At the height of the season it was estimated that Bath could accommodate some 12,000 visitors, and many stayed for several weeks to drink the waters, attend concerts, shop for luxury goods and generally gossip and parade on the fine promenades.

Contemporary journals and letters (including Gainsborough’s witty correspondence) and caricatures are used to bring the city, its buildings and personalities to life. The lecture explores how and why a young, entrepreneurial Gainsborough identified Bath as ‘the’ place from which to build his reputation. What was the experience like for those who jostled to sit to Mr Gainsborough during the Bath season? What did High Society do to entertain themselves? The focus will be on Gainsborough’s work in Bath and comparisons will be made with his contemporaries and rivals. For painting was, in Gainsborough’s words ‘a little business for the eye’.

