

travel

Museum in England reconstructs early America

King George III might have disapproved, but visitors to Bath find it splendid

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On our way to visit the American Museum here, we stopped off at the town's magnificent Guildhall, opened in 1775 — the same year the American Revolution began. Inside, Joshua Reynolds' huge portrait of George III glared down at us. The Bathonian friend with me jokingly remarked that the king wouldn't have been too pleased with the idea of an American museum in this city.

But 100,000 visitors a year to the world's only museum of Americana outside the United States have found it a splendid idea.

The American Museum at Claverton Manor has been described as a "living history lesson" and an "entertaining cultural bridge." It boasts a valuable collection of American decorative art, together with exhibits that interpret the early history of the U.S.

Housed in a 150-year-old hilltop mansion, the museum, opened in 1961, consists of 20 rooms surrounded by acres of greenery overlooking the Limpley Stoke Valley. Most of the rooms, arranged in chronological order, contain articles from American homes of the late 17th to mid-19th centuries. Furnishings, interior walls, even floorboards were shipped across the Atlantic and painstakingly reconstructed to form these handsome exhibits.

The rooms — parlors with Chippendale style highboys and gracefully curved mahogany

chairs; dining rooms with Duncan Phyfe pieces and massive fireplaces; bedrooms with stencil-decorated walls and canopied beds; and a "borning room" with a four-poster for mothers in childbirth — depict the domestic life-styles of America's yesteryears, from Puritan New England to Spanish New Mexico.

Exploring these chambers, the visitor feels much like a guest browsing through a friend's home. A "Please Touch" section encourages children and blind persons to handle artifacts like whale oil lamps, Indian dolls, waffle irons, and arrowheads. And the feel of the American past comes even nearer when visiting school-children are invited to dress up in the museum's 18th-century costumes and stroll about with their classmates.

Among the authentic interiors is the cozy, candle-lit tavern that once belonged to William Conkey of Massachusetts. Below the fireplace lintel bearing the date "June ye 21st 1776" (less than two weeks before the Declaration of Independence was signed), tasty gingerbread is baked daily in a beehive oven and offered to visitors. George Washington enjoyed this same delicacy — the recipe used belonged to his mother.

The museum's country store is jam-packed with the village needs of 19th-century rural America: sugar loaf, patent medicines, cans of biscuits, skirt hoops, bed-warming pans, high-button shoes, gunpowder, gingham, and gew-gaws. The emporium-cum-post office is open for business, but today's customers can only buy souvenirs.

Another country store, this one in miniature, is one of five popular American "institutions" reproduced in Lilliputian-size in the museum's education center, a favorite place for children. Fascinating models of an old-fashioned drug store, barber shop, antiques store, and a cluttered attic astonish the viewer with their attention to the tiniest detail.

American craftsmanship in silver, pewter, glass, and textiles is on display in showcases throughout the museum. Among the silver objects is a handsome "cann" (mug) made by Thomas Revere, brother of Paul and no untalented silversmith himself.

In the pewterware collection are several 18th-century pieces made by Thomas Billings, a Providence pewterer, who once advertised himself as "Young in life, and having a desire to be employed as well as to please."

More than 50 patterns are represented in the colorful assortment of quilts and hooked rugs, treasured items of Americana which have recently aroused much interest in Britain. The museum will be sponsoring an exhibition on the "American Quilt Tradition" in London this summer in honor of the U.S. bicentennial.

On the spacious grounds of Claverton Manor, a group of evocative exhibits have been appropriately placed in an outdoor setting: a Conestoga covered wagon, the "prairie schooner" of pioneer days, a Pullman coach observation platform of the kind used by touring presidential candidates, and a replica of a Cheyenne Indian tepee. Alive and growing well on the tidy lawns are a traditionally-designed colonial herb garden and an exact duplicate of George Washington's Mount Vernon rose and flower garden, complete with the eight-sided garden

house where his step-grandchildren went to school.

The former stables of Claverton Manor have been converted into a Gallery of Folk Art, where the work of dozens of little-known artists has been preserved. Among the family portraits, weather-vanes, and sculptures, are a number of "cigar store Indians," for many generations of Americans a storefront landmark as familiar as the striped barber pole.

The American Museum was founded by two American Anglophiles, the late John Judkyn and Dr. Dallas Pratt. Mr. Judkyn, English-born, became a U.S. citizen as a young man, while Dr. Pratt spent much time in Britain as a youth. Both agreed that the British public knew too little about American history, art, and culture — outside the image presented by movies and television.

After acquiring Claverton Manor, a neo-classic building of honey-colored local Bath stone, the two men selectively gathered and shipped a great quantity of American antiques to it. Their enthusiasm spread to other donors, who have since contributed hundreds of precious pieces of Americana. The museum is constantly expanding, adding rooms and acquisitions each year.

Special programs are planned for the bicentennial, including diorama scenes of the American Revolution, art exhibits, and films.

The museum is open daily from 2 to 5 p.m., from late March to late October. Arrangements can be made for groups to visit in other months (except January) upon application. Hourly trains leave Paddington Station, London, for Bath; the trip takes about 90 minutes.

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