

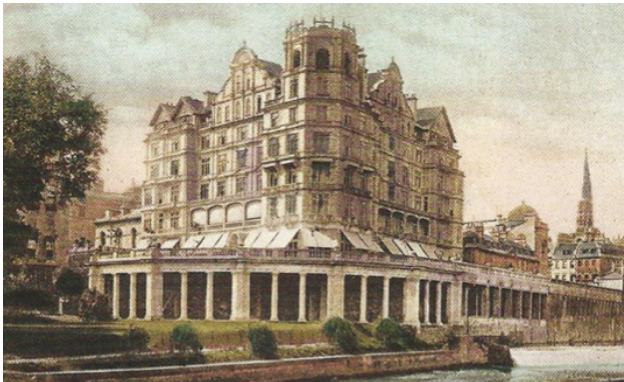


## History of the Architect, Bath

### The Hotel Years

The Architect, Bath is housed within what was once the Table D'Hôte Room and Supplemental Dining Room of the Empire Hotel. Built from 1899 to 1901 and designed by Major Charles Edward Davis for the hotelier Alfred Holland and his company Spiers and Pond. The site chosen was Orange Grove Court and required the demolition of various properties including the Grove Hotel, Withy & Co Soda Manufactory, the Athenaeum, Winchester House and Nassau House. Several old slaughterhouses had already been demolished.

The Empire occupies a large L shaped block. It is six storeys high plus the octagonal corner tower and two basement levels. The front of the building overlooking Orange Grove has eight bays while the side overlooking the River Avon has nine bays gazing down upon Pulteney Weir. These glorious views are enjoyed by the residents who now inhabit the building since it was converted into residential use in 1996. Many of the beautiful hotel communal spaces remain to this day including the outstanding feature of the grand staircase.



*The Empire Hotel depicted in an old Frith Series Postcard circa 1900s.*

This was not the building's first change of use. On 2nd September 1939 it was requisitioned by the Admiralty for use in World II and it was used by the Royal Navy (later the MoD) and remained in their possession until 1989.

The Admiralty used the premises for the office of the Director-General of Ships, the Common Services Department, various clerks (including the poet John Betjeman working for P Branch (the Publication Branch), typists, Interview Rooms and the Civil Establishments Branch (Personnel).



*Admiralty moving into the Empire in 1940.*

A central postal sorting office was established in the Reading Room, one of the communal rooms now used as a dining room for the residents.

The hotel dining room (now part of The Architect) became a British Restaurant and canteen providing subsidized meals for the town centre Admiralty establishments under the auspices of the Admiralty Luncheon Club.

Major Davis' design caused quite a stir. The extraordinary roofline said to depict three classes of people; a cottage, a manor house and a castle, means that it is still a talking point today – described as anything from “elegant” and “eccentric” to a “sunken architectural soufflé”. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, the architectural historian, described it as a ‘monstrosity and an unbelievable piece of pompous architecture’.

We rather like it!

The project was funded by the hotel group Spiers and Pond. Building work began in Summer 1899. In erecting The Empire, Davis demolished a chunk of Georgian history, slaughterhouses, tenements, the Withy & Co Soda Water Manufactory roughly under the hotel dining room, Winchester House, Nassau House, the Grove Tavern, three other properties in Orange Grove and the Athenaeum Club were all swept away. In an archaeological excavation at the hotel, prior to the conversion into residential apartments in the early 1990's, parts of the old city wall and of the Roman and mediaeval city walls were rediscovered beneath The Empire's basement.

The Empire was to cost £50,000 (around £5.5m at today's prices). The grand opening took place on 28th November 1901. The road outside was not complete but enough of it was there to get the 30 horse drawn carriages from the station to the hotel. Sadly Major Davis had little time to enjoy his achievement, as he died the following year.

The cost of staying at The Empire varied, but in the 1920s a self-contained suite on the first or second floors containing a bedroom, dressing room, bathroom and sitting room cost two guineas per night, or around £200 today. The Empire was a hotel where royalty and politicians, writers and film stars would rub shoulders. Lloyd George, Rudyard Kipling and Radclyffe Hall were among the hotel's guests. Many of the local Bath societies, like the Cricket and Motoring Clubs, also used The Empire's facilities. Staff who worked at The Empire had trained in hotels like the Ritz in Paris and the Savoy in London and included a driver for the hotel's motorbus, the hotel's own musicians and valets who were available to guests who had not brought their own servants.



*The Ladies Empire Luncheon Club pictured in 1921.*

On 2nd September 1939, before the declaration of war on 3rd September, Bath's hotels were given just 24 hours to empty. The Admiralty was moving in and The Empire Hotel had to vacate over 100 guests, including ten long-term residents.

### **Our Architect**

We chose to name our pub after Major Charles Edward Davis, but that being quite a mouthful, we opted for his job title.

Major Charles Edward Davis (1828–1902) was an English architect and antiquary. Born on the outskirts of Bath, on 29 August, he was son of Edward Davis who was also an architect and taught his son.

The rank of Major by which Davis was generally addressed, was an honorary title given him by the Worcester militia on his retirement in 1881. He joined the Bath volunteer rifles

for a short while when he became aware that to 'rise in the ranks' he would need to have some military service.

Before designing the Empire, the Major, then city surveyor, was asked in 1871 to investigate a leak of hot water into the basement of houses near to the Abbey. There he found remains of Roman thermal work and published a descriptive account. In 1877–8 he exposed the Roman reservoir beneath the King's Bath, named after King Henry I in the 11th century and hidden for over 1400 years. In 1880-1 the Major found the Great Bath and in 1884–6 the Circular Bath.



*The Queens Bath, Stall Street c.1930s.*

The Old Queen's Bath, constructed in 1597 was removed in the course of the Roman discoveries of 1885. The Major's design for the new Queen's Bath, began construction in 1886 and was completed in 1889. The work and incidental restoration met with criticism on structural as well as archaeological grounds and local debate was heated.



*Major Charles Edward Davis, circa 1880.*

Besides his work for the corporation, the Major had a private practice where he designed and restored churches, including St Peter's in Freshford and St Mary Magdalene's Church in Langridge, Charlcombe and, if you look opposite the pub, the Colonnades, balustrading, steps and kiosk at Parade Gardens.

*Much information gleaned with thanks from a very informative article by Catherine Pitt in Bath Magazine 'Glory days of the Empire', and from Doc Watson's book 'Exposed. The Major and the Roman Baths'.*