

09 VALLEY GARDENS NORTH YORKSHIRE

With lots to do, good paths and a cosy cafe in a historic building, this Harrogate park is ideal for a Christmas family outing, says **David Winpenny**



Take refuge in the inviting Magnesia Well Cafe in the Valley Gardens

Valley Gardens might look Edwardian but a walk here will take you back four and a half centuries to the discovery, by William Slingsby in 1571, of a spring with medicinal properties. By 1693 the water was being bottled for invalids around the country.

IN ELGAR'S FOOTSTEPS

For a pleasant stroll in the gardens, start at the former Pump Room, near the entrance, and take the broad path to the left. This is the Elgar Walk – the composer, a frequent visitor to the town, regularly walked from his hotel to the unromantically named Bogs Field. Here the narrow valley widens; nearby is the ornate café, formerly the New

Magnesium Well Pump Room. Bogs Field was well named; in less than an acre 36 springs or 'wells' bubbled up to the surface. Each had a different chemical composition – Harrogate had a more diverse choice of healing waters than anywhere else in the world.

WARMING ACTIVITIES

The wells are now capped, but you can see where many were located; the wellheads of the Pure Chalybeate (iron-bearing) Well and the Magnesia Well have been restored.

Most footpaths in the gardens are suitable for wheelchair users and there are disabled toilets. Even in the depths of winter the gardens are full of horticultural interest. While the paddling

pool and the boating lake are not available in the colder months, the playground, with its adventurous equipment including a wooden aeroplane, is always an attraction. You can bring your skateboard to the skate park, try crazy golf or even have a game of table tennis (bring bats and ball) on the permanent table.

Beyond the gardens is an atmospheric walk through pine woods. You can extend it by following signs to the RHS Harlow Carr Gardens and then back into Harrogate via Birk Crag woodland.



David Winpenny loves the outdoors and the arts and is the author of several guidebooks.



CHRISTIE MYSTERY

In December 1926 novelist Agatha Christie suddenly disappeared from her Surrey home and was missing, feared dead, for 11 days. Eventually it was discovered that she'd stayed at Harrogate (using the name of her husband's mistress) at the Swan Hydropathic Hotel – now the Old Swan Hotel – a few hundred yards from the Valley Gardens, which she visited during her brief stay.

Photo: Alamy