

## The Best Bookshops in Bath, United Kingdom

**Michael Warren** takes us on a tour of the best bookshops in Bath, United Kingdom. If there's a bookshop that you think other students and academics should visit when they're undertaking research or visiting a city for a conference, further information about contributing follows this article.



**Image Credit: Roman Public Baths in Bath, UK (Diliff)**

A telltale sign of a good book is if it can whisk you away from the toil of the world. Like a good yarn, a great bookshop has the power to carry a person away from the worries and monotony of the present. Unsurprisingly for a city which has inspired literary titans like Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, Bath offers a nirvana of varied and well-stocked independent bookshops in which avid readers can immerse themselves.

When alighting from the train in the scenic spa town, a visitor can immediately take refuge from hectic central Bath at **George Bayntun**. All visitors must press a bell and wait to be buzzed into the shop, giving an odd feeling similar to a border crossing between divergent countries. On entering the quiet and capacious building, visitors' eyes are drawn to the antiquarian treasures – mostly maps and first edition books – which sit in glass cases. Descending the stairs, visitors can find well-stocked secondhand specialist books in fields as diverse as topography and 'pictorial covers'. The latter group houses books adorned with vivid cover decorations. They are often boys' and girls' adventure books of the early twentieth century – sometimes with peculiar titles like the lachrymose *The Loneliest Girl in the School*.

Hiking up the gentle slopes of Bath, a bibliophile will find **Bath Old Books** next to the Royal Crescent, the famous arc of Georgian houses overloaded with tourists. The floor space is minute, but every inch of utility has been eked out by the friendly cooperative to house many book specialisms, such as architecture and history. Even the wall of the staircase has not been left naked and is clothed by beautiful watercolours and lithographs of the local region for sale.

A similar enterprise to Bath Old Books is **Skoobs** (no relation to the one in Bloomsbury, London) in the Bath Guildhall Market. Under the shelter of an elegant Victorian iron and glass structure, Skoobs's contents wrap around a wall in the atrium of the market. In the winter it is a chilly place, and the hardy staff of two are often submerged beneath thick layers of clothing as they perpetually reorganise the chaos. Filled to the brim with fiction, the only taxonomy is provided by the few labels perched above the shelves. These range from the specific 'family sagas' to the broad 'contemporary fiction'. Disorder reigns beneath as items are not alphabetised, and staff wage a perpetual battle to enforce order over the shelves. Customers are encouraged to dive into the stacks of books, but if you want a specific item, then the navigation of a staff member is required. The trick is to embrace the chaos, and well-priced unexpected treasures are soon to be found.

Moving from the small eclectic stores mentioned, two larger establishments dominate Bath's literary scene: **Topping and Company Booksellers** and **Mr B's Emporium of Reading Delights (Mr B's)**. The former entices visitors from the street with its serene classical music and prominent advertisements of the latest literary names to speak at the shop. **Topping** is part of a small chain of bookshops also found in two other equally idyllic places, Ely and St Andrews. In contrast to the previously mentioned shops with their dog-eared, well-thumbed and well-loved volumes, many of the books are trapped in a prison of cellophane. There is a pleasant artistic bent to the shop with many books on photography, artistic monographs, decorative arts, illustration and even adverts for oil painting holidays in Transylvania.

However, it is **Mr B's** that is the jewel in the bibliophile's crown of Bath. This is a two-time winner of the UK Independent Bookseller of the Year award, gaining the accolade through an innovative but lighthearted mentality, producing gifts such as 'Mr B's Reading Spa' (where 'bibliotherapy' customers build a reading list of titles suited to their palate under the guidance of their 'bibliotherapist'). A warm ambience is prominent due to the fireplaces, soporific armchairs and tea for all. In keeping with the jocular style of conducting business, there is a bathtub of books in reference to the city. On the top floor, the wisdom of 'Mr B's Delightful Lists' and 'Mr B's Hall of Fame' offers thoughtful assistance in book selection to customers lost in a sea of wonderful books. With the recent creation and expansion of its own imprint, growth at Mr B's shows no sign of abating.





Bath Old Books. Copyright Stephen McKay.



Image courtesy of Mr B's.

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**Michael Warren** completed an MSc in Empires, Colonialism and Globalisation at the LSE in 2012, and graduated from the University of Sheffield (studying on exchange at the University of Waterloo, Ontario) with a BA in Modern History in 2011. He researched on an open data project for Deloitte and the Open Data Institute, and worked for the All-Party Parliamentary Health Group and as a Management Consultant in Health and Public Service at Accenture. He is a Policy Adviser at the Professional Standards Authority. [Read more features by Michael Warren](#).

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**Do you have a favourite bookshop?** If there's a bookshop that you think other students and academics should visit when they're undertaking research or visiting a city for a conference, then this is your chance to tell us all about it.

As part of a [regular feature](#) on *LSE Review of Books*, we're asking academics and students to recommend their favourite two or three bookshops in a particular city, with the aim of building an exciting online series for our book-loving community of readers the world over.

Bookshops could be academic, alternative, foreign language, hobby-based, secret or underground institutions, secondhand outlets or connected to a university. We'd like to cover all world regions too.

If something comes to mind, we're looking for around 150 words per bookshop, detailing why each place is a must-see. Our editorial team can then find suitable photos and links to accompany the piece, though you're welcome to supply these too. We only ask that you focus on just one city or region, and two or three bookshops within it.

**Email us now if you'd like to contribute:** [lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk](mailto:lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk)

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