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Oban Hills Hydropathic Sanatorium;  
Oban Palace Hotel and Hydropathic -  
Oban, Argyll and Bute





47.510. Oban; Argyle Square. FF & Co.

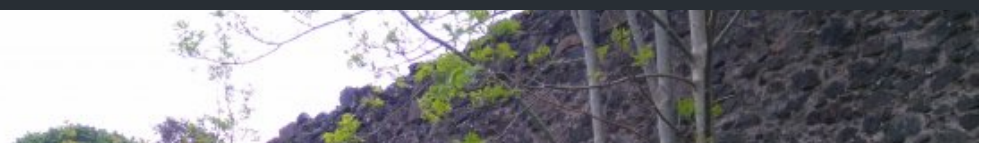
## Creating a hydropathic in Oban

*Using water for therapeutic purposes has been practised in Scotland since at least the Roman period [<https://canmore.org.uk/insites/64>]. Renewed interest was sparked in the 1840s by reports in British medical journals of the hydropathic cures of Vincenz Priessnitz in Gräfenberg, Austrian Silesia (today Lázně Jeseník, Czech Republic). In Argyll and Bute, hydropathic establishments were opened in Rothesay and Dunoon in the same decade.*

*Health resorts across Europe developed with the expansion of steamer and railway routes to remote and scenic locations in the mountains and along the coast. As the 19th century progressed physicians, psychiatric and alternative practitioners prescribed stays at distant resorts to restore the health of a usually well-off, cultured, and urban clientele. Removal from the hazards and stresses of everyday city life to quieter, climatically advantageous spas and hydros was believed to aid physical and nervous disorders. 'Nerves' could refer to a variety of conditions, from stress or depression to severe mental ill-health, or sexual dysfunction and disease. Promotional material for individual hydros outlined the conditions treated and, in tandem, those which were unwelcome. It emphasised and exaggerated luxury, comfort, cleanliness. Modern facilities, such as electric lighting, lifts and therapeutic equipment, were a clear advantage, as well as the range of treatments and diverting activities on offer.*

*Oban in the 1870s, though already promoted as a health resort, was without a hydropathic establishment; in 1876 planning began. These were exciting times full of potential - the Callander and Oban Railway linking the area to the south was already nearing Dalmally, and would reach Oban a few years later. It was in this climate that the board of the Oban Hills Hydropathic Sanatorium Ltd called for shareholders to raise capital to begin construction of the 137-bedroom building. Plans by Glasgow architect and civil engineer, J. Ford Mackenzie, described in the Glasgow Herald as 'an ardent hydropathist', were approved and tenders accepted for stone and brick work by Robert McAlpine & Company. Both Ford Mackenzie, about whom little else is known, and the Oban Hills Hydropathic Sanatorium Ltd, had offices at 58 Bath Street, Glasgow, and it seems possible that Ford Mackenzie himself spearheaded the project. By 1881 construction was underway with progress reaching parts of the roof in 1882. Shortly thereafter all work stopped, as the funds were completely exhausted.*

*In December 1896 a new company was established and it sought shareholders for an expanded scheme of 500 bedrooms from London, where an increasingly large proportion of annual visitors to Oban originated. But no further work was carried out, and The London Gazette reported the liquidation of the Company on 28 July 1899. The majority of the Hydropathic was demolished as soon as 1908. Some of its stone was used to construct houses located on and adjacent to Rockfield Road.*





## Imagining the Oban Hydro

*Although only fragments of the building survive, contemporary maps and photographs, complemented by newspaper articles and an artist's impression (the 1898 OS 25-inch map shows the plan in some detail) paint a vivid picture of the Hydro. It would have been an imposing building in the Scots Baronial style, one of several architectural fashions in late 19th-century hotels, hospitals and asylums; the hydro bridged the spectrum between these distinct and familiar building types and collected together a diverse range of patient types.*

*The building was constructed of rubble and brick with dressings in grey, snecked, ashlar stone and some cast concrete. The tall, guest-bedroom windows were regularly distributed, had contrasting pink stone lintels, jambs and sills, and were splayed to the inside. Each bedroom was furnished with a small fireplace. The roofline was dynamic: the building would have been between three and six storeys in height with crow-stepped gables, towers and turrets. Its principal elevation faced west, offering a view over the bay and islands to as many rooms as possible. It was to be furnished with verandas on the ground and first floors, to provide immediate exposure to fresh air and natural light in all weathers, complementing the hydropathy at the centre of the therapeutic regime.*

*Advertisements announced 'Turkish, Russian, Spray, Douche, Vapour, Electric and other appliances, with large Salt-Water swimming baths for ladies and gentlemen'; as well as an indoor gymnasium and outdoor spaces for croquet, tennis, lawn bowls, archery and woodland and garden walks. The luxurious facilities, expected by affluent clientele, were to include: a 'grand' dining room, drawing rooms and private parlours; reading and writing rooms; ladies' rooms; billiard, chess and smoking rooms, for men; a concert hall; a large winter garden and the ubiquitous Victorian fernery. By 1896, the modernity of the hydro was underlined: it was to be 'fitted with the perfect heating, ventilation and sanitary appliances' and would have bicycles for hire with lessons offered. The building was to be serviced by its own gas and sewage works, laundry, workshops and stables.*

*The aspirations of the Oban Hills Hydropathic Sanatorium Ltd and the Oban Palace Hotel and Hydropathic Company Limited far exceeded the financial means at their disposal, and by 1897, when Argyll Square and the Royal Hotel were photographed, the incomplete Hydro loomed eerily above the town. In 2017 the remaining fragments of the building are overgrown, ruinous and obscured from view at street level, a hidden story for all but the most intrepid historian, archaeologist or tourist. Why not take a look the next time you visit Oban?*



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Dr Nicky Imrie - Training Officer, Scotland's Urban Past (Photographs courtesy of Peigi MacKillop and David Henty)







<https://canmore.org.uk/site/158065/oban-hydropathic-hotel>



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