

Chapel Arts Creative Writing Group

presents

“The Secret Gardens”

Celebrating 150 Years of the Pavilion Gardens

in stories, poems and a short play



VOLUME 1

Texts of the first YouTube video

Essay	Mark Henderson:	<i>History of Buxton's Theatres</i>
Story	Stephanie Billen:	<i>The Confluence</i>
Limerick	Pete Stellings:	<i>Pavilion Gardens</i>
Story	Caroline Hardwick:	<i>Another Perspective</i> , read by Alexandra Coates

Four Theatres in Buxton

Mark Henderson

Buxton has had theatres for a surprisingly long time, and most of them are connected with the Pavilion Gardens. I obtained much of my information about them from my friends Netta Christie of “Discover Buxton” and the actor Carol Spencer. Carol used Netta’s research to entertain groups of visitors to Buxton with her Edwardian Lady tour of the theatre sites, particularly the Opera House.

Historically, the **first theatre** was in Tideswell Lane, subsequently called Spring Gardens, where the Argos store now stands. During the late 17th century, actors from Drury Lane wanted to enjoy country air when the London season closed, and they were particularly attracted by Buxton. The village was a long way from London, it was high in the wilds of Derbyshire, and it provided healing waters. The Drury Lane actors stayed at the Shakespeare Inn, which was built for them in 1701 close to the theatre, on a location now occupied by the Mountain Warehouse shop. When the Drury Lane actors were in London, local performers took their place in Buxton. It’s said that none of the local actors was less than seventy years old, except for “two little urchins”.

One family, the Thornhills, sometimes took all the roles in a production, including a production of *Hamlet*. You can see their memorials in the graveyard of St Ann’s church. At least one visiting actor is also buried there. He died from picking horseradish to supplement the beef on which he was dining; unfortunately he couldn’t distinguish horseradish from hemlock. On his deathbed he ordered that he was to be buried the opposite way round from the norm – feet pointing to the West, not the East – so on Resurrection Morn he would rise to face a ready-made audience as they too ascended from their graves.

The second theatre stood near where the noticeboard opposite the Old Hall Hotel now greets visitors to the Pavilion Gardens. The Duke of Devonshire allowed the building and rented it to the theatre director. During the 1830s, Paganini performed there. He was touring Europe and came to Buxton directly from Paris. The theatre was crammed to see and hear the celebrity; the audience spilled out on to the roof and all around the building. They were surprised by Paganini’s habit of standing on one leg as he played.

The second theatre was not long-lived, though. It was demolished on the orders of the Duke of Devonshire because the director had absconded without paying the rent. No sign of it now remains.

The third theatre was established some decades later in what is now the Pavilion Arts Centre.

The Opera House is the fourth theatre. It was designed by England's most prolific theatre architect, Frank Matcham, and was considered the jewel in Buxton's crown. The design was both imaginative and practical: the great arches hid the load-bearing beams, and there were vents in the roof to control temperature and carry away the cigar smoke. Matcham also followed his usual practice of employing local artists to decorate the interior. There was African onyx at the front of the stage, there was a deep Turkish red carpet, and there was leather wallpaper.

On the evening preceeding its official opening night, 31st May 1903, the Opera House staged a musical entertainment for local people. The heads of the Buxton Improvement Company joined them, having dined nearby. And then came opening night: the first of June 1903. The front of the building was illuminated by firework displays; bands played; crowds cheered. Carriages deposited the rich patrons at the main entrance: ladies in elegant dresses and glorious hats, gentlemen with gleaming pocket watches and hats purchased at a local store - in accordance with their social status. There was a turnstile entrance for holders of cheaper tickets.

The head of the Opera House was John Willoughby. It was a coup for him to engage the London theatre company for his opening night (with five more performances to follow) and to have the comedy *Mrs Willoughby's Kiss* by Frank Stayton (1874-1951) as the main attraction. *Mrs Willoughby's Kiss* had been performed in London in front of royalty a fortnight earlier. Stayton composed several plays and later he wrote film scripts. The small accompanying play, presented as a warm-up to the main event, was a one-act dialogue called *My Milliners Bill* by G. W. Godfrey, whose best-known play was (apparently) *The Parvenu*. Before the plays were performed, the full house audience was treated to a delivery of *The Prologue*, an accolade in ornate Edwardian prose written specially for the occasion.

The plot of *Mrs Willoughby's Kiss* is set in British India. Mrs Willoughby and her friend are travelling to the subcontinent to join their husbands, who both hold distinguished posts; the ladies haven't seen their husbands for several years, so their feelings can readily be imagined. When they reach the residence it's the middle of the day and the blinds have been closed to keep out the worst of the heat. Overcome with emotion and half-blinded by the gloom, Mrs Willoughby rushes to her husband and embraces him passionately - only to discover that she's embraced her friend's husband. As a result of the intense kiss, the pair fall in love; confusion reigns... but of course the play ends happily.

Needless to say this was a delightful entertainment for an Edwardian audience, but the ladies who attended the opening night were rather put out by the request to remove their hats, which were obscuring the view of people seated behind them. Moreover, their hat-pins injured the upholstery of the seat backs.

For the gentlemen, there was a private drinking establishment across the road from the Opera House. Needless to say, ladies did not frequent places where alcohol was sold. However, there *were* women in the said establishment, available for hire by gentlemen seeking female company. It's undergone a change of use and is now The Old Clubhouse.

As the fame of the Opera House spread, crowds were to be seen pouring from the station to the building on performance nights. And no doubt enjoying the Pavilion Gardens too while they were in town.

The Confluence

Stephanie Billen

It wasn't the quietest corner she could have found for their reunion. Although the curved benches on the Pavilion Gardens' Spiral Mound were a little elevated, there was a steady rushing sound from the nearby fountain and occasional honkings from overfed male mallards strutting over the grass. Nor were the benches hers alone. A sad sigh emanated from a middle-aged man who'd perched himself as far from her as he could, shoulders hunched in his anorak, scanning the park for his own rendezvous.

The air was cool but the spring sunshine warmed her greying hair, unkempt after the long lockdown. She'd worn her better jumper, a pink fleece that was kind to her complexion, but otherwise she'd opted for comfort. She felt she'd worn nothing but jeans lately. Surely summer would come soon. The passers-by looked relaxed and loose-limbed as their bodies acknowledged the beautiful day, though their minds were distracted by work and the prospect of lunch.

A church bell tolled twelve times. In one minute he'd be officially late. It should have been pleasant sitting here, gazing at daffodils partying across the slope up to the Broad Walk, but she was on edge. Would he show up? Did she want him to?

Elsa's eye fell on the information sign traversed by restless bluebottles. She stood up and read its speculations about the Spiral Mound's origins: a Celtic temple built around 3000 BC at the confluence of the gritstone and limestone River Wye.

As she returned to the bench, the stranger rose and strode across the park, the sun finding copper in his short brown hair. She watched him. Jeans like her. Trainers. He was taller than he'd seemed sitting down and his walk seemed purposeful, as if he'd given up waiting and was glad to be free of expectations.

A robin moved in to inspect the ground where he'd been sitting. Then it too moved on. She wasn't sorry to be alone. If Bob did come she'd rather there wasn't an audience. Their story was nearly over. She'd been on the point of breaking up with him last March, but with his mother dying, and then the lockdown... It was never a good moment. And since they'd been unable to see each other and irritate each other in person, their relationship had plateaued into something oddly achievable. They sent each other funny videos, the world's desperate attempts to make the pandemic palatable. Once, maybe twice, they'd had grainy WhatsApp

calls, initiated by him yet always at a time that seemed inconvenient to him. She began to think he was glad to bring their stilted conversations to an end with a brisk: ‘Well, cat’s pestering me now. Better get off and feed her’ or ‘Sorry, another call coming in. I thought that might happen’, or lamest of all: ‘Well I’m sure you’re busy. Better let you go...’

Yet neither of them had quite let each other go. So when meeting in the park - appropriately socially distanced - was allowed again, he’d sent her the news item link as if he felt that’s what they should do. That was how she’d interpreted his message, anyway. They’d set the date two weeks ago - her idea - and the effect had been to dry up all communication between them, as if they feared that possible avenues of conversation might be squandered in advance.

She hadn’t reminded him, partly because she felt he’d be more comfortable with the idea of “forgetting” than actually breaking up with her. She sighed. Such a mess. Why could neither of them just be honest? She tried meditating, tuning into the noises around her. Now she could hear the river as well as the fountain. It was weird about the two different rocks coming together in one town, her town. She looked at her watch: fifteen minutes past. What would she be if she was a rock? Gritstone, definitely. Resistant to erosion by the river of life. She’d weathered a lot in her fifty-five years. Bob too, to be fair. He’d had that wobble in his forties when she’d first met him at the walking group organised by the medical practice, but he’d done well since. Yet that in itself had changed the dynamic between them. Time was when he’d needed her. Then, when she’d shown vulnerability after the kids left home, he’d seemed taken aback. She’d clammed up with him, finding more comfort in online forums and her yoga class.

She leant back and closed her eyes, enjoying the red light through her eyelids. Then it went dark. She looked up abruptly. That man again, standing in front of her now but looking at the information board. He glanced round.

‘Sorry, didn’t mean to disturb you. Just interested in the mound. I didn’t know all that.’

She smiled, a little dozily. ‘I thought you’d gone. You were miles away a minute ago. I thought you’d given up on whoever you were waiting for.’

He frowned slightly, one brown eyebrow rising higher than the other in a way that reminded her of her childhood dog.

‘I wasn’t waiting for anyone. Or I didn’t think I was...’

Their eyes locked briefly. Then he looked back at the board.

‘No, I was just trying to get my steps up. I do this: march around and then get tired so I have to sit down. But they say I should keep up the activity as much as I can in between sessions. Sorry, you don’t want to hear this. That’s the thing about lockdown. You don’t speak to anyone and then you find yourself gabbling.’

She leant forward and touched his arm fleetingly.

‘I do, actually. I do want to hear. It’s not chemo, is it?’

He turned around. ‘Yes, months and months of the bloody stuff. But the prognosis is pretty good. They say it’s precautionary, to make sure the cancer doesn’t return.’

She smiled. ‘Been there, done that. You’ll get through it. I’m sure you’re doing all the right things.’

He shifted slightly. ‘Thanks. Mind if I sit down for a sec?’

‘Sure, it’s a free bench!’

He sank down beside her, dipping his chin in that hunched way she’d already begun to recognise.

‘Work’s been very good about it anyway.’

She waited but he didn’t elaborate.

‘And you’ve got a bit of support at home?’ she began tentatively.

He gave a short laugh. ‘Not unless you count the dog, and she seems to think I smell funny these days. No. I was married once but, you know... No kids, so we called it a day in the end.’

He lifted his head and stared at a wren on a nearby bush. She saw his eyes glistening a little.

‘So where do you work, then?’ she asked, seeking safer territory.

‘Oh, at the quarry. I’m a site manager there. They’re a good crew actually.’ He looked instantly more at ease. ‘That’s why I was interested to read about the mound. I ought to know all this, given my job. We’re supposed to be a leader in “limestone solutions” or something. Looks as if our ancestors knew more about geology than we do!’

Elsa glanced at her watch.

‘Sorry, are you expecting someone? I can go and sit over there again.’

She felt awkward. ‘No, please don’t! Sounds weird, but I’m not sure if I was expecting someone or not. I don’t think we made it clear. It doesn’t matter anyway. He won’t come now. It’s half past.’

The man made no comment; then he slapped his thigh decisively: ‘Well, I’m off to get a sandwich, if that appeals. Or I could bring you one back?’

Two Canada geese emerged from the bushes, honking wildly. The noise made them both laugh. To Elsa, it sounded like a cheer. It was if they too sensed that a “limestone solution” to her loneliness was starting to present itself. She didn’t hesitate.

‘No, I’m not going to wait any longer. And I need to move. I’m getting stiff. Let’s get your step count going again and wander over to the café. My name’s Elsa, by the way. We can sit outside...’

‘Mine’s Tim. And I think that’s an excellent idea.’

They got up eagerly, giggling as they took the circuitous spiral path down to the rest of the park. She led the way, Tim following her, taking in her neat figure.

Up on the Broad Walk a balding man in his sixties saw them turn the corner and head towards the café, side by side, arms bumping together occasionally. Bob sighed. He felt wistful but also glad. He didn’t think he was a bad man but he wasn’t one for confrontation. He nearly hadn’t come at all. Now he saw that Elsa didn’t need him, either. They’d been swept along together for too long by the increasingly turbulent river of life. Maybe they both needed to make decisions for themselves now. Time for something new.

Buxton Fringe

Pete Stelling

For gardens at Buxton Pavilion,
the Council were granted a million.

The public said “No”
so, Guv, you must go
for painting the bandstand vermillion.

Another Perspective

Caroline Hardwick

‘Can I go play on the slides, Mom?’

I look across at the playground. It seems really nice, very new and quite busy.

‘Here, take some wet wipes. Remember to use them on your hands if you touch the ground.’

‘Mom! Please...’ Chris runs off, sturdy brown legs poking out of his yellow shorts.

Things are gonna be tough; I think I may be allergic to antiques, and everything seems so old. Tall stone buildings, narrow roads, narrow sidewalks. I’m used to wide boulevards, ranch houses, and the wide open skies of Minnesota. But at least there are lots of trees here, and the gardens are so green. The sounds of splashing and a parade of ducks remind me that there’s no water rationing here, not even in the summer.

Ted is going to be okay: he has a job. What will I do? I’m a stay at home mom without a home. I’m over-whelmed and over here. Isolation and homesickness has hit me, and I feel tears rolling down my cheeks. I shut my eyes and let the fatigue of a confused body take over.

There are groups of ladies dressed in long skirts with bustles and bonnets over their elaborate hair-dos, giggling together while a few young men look on. The guys are stiff in waistcoats, jackets and top hats. There’s hooting, and suddenly a huge steam train appears, pounding across the park towards me. I try to get up but I’m paralysed. I can only watch as the metal nose of the fiery beast approaches. The young women scream and everyone is pointing at me.

Heart pounding, I wake up. I hear a faint tooting and my heart’s doing the Texas Two-Step again. Then, I see the miniature train on its track, circling the park. That’s what found its way into the dream. Chris will love that. There are kids and grandparents waving from the carriages. My head turns to follow them and suddenly I realize I’m not alone. There’s a woman sitting on the other end of the bench. Jeez! I must have been asleep when she sat down. Hope I wasn’t snoring. She probably thinks I’m some sort of drunk. I feel I owe her an explanation or apology, and I don’t even know her. She has her head turned, watching the train’s progress. Her short cotton sundress is a cool yellow with white daisies. Her hair is a long blonde bob with bangs. She’s wearing a pair of oversized designer sunglasses with an air of cool sophistication. Yeah, I bet I was snoring. Drooling as well.

‘Jet lag. I’m so sorry!’

She turns and seems not to understand. Maybe she's foreign? She looks a bit flaky. Maybe she was asleep, like me, under those sunglasses. I make a mental note to buy myself a pair.

'Sorry?'

I think I've just nailed this English conversation thing. Just keep saying "sorry" and suddenly you're a native.

'I said I have jet-lag. That's why I was asleep.'

'Oh. I've never been on a jet, but I hear the time difference can cause problems.'

'Lucky you, not having to fly.'

'Are you here on holiday?'

She's definitely British, probably local, but I'm not good at accents.

'No. We've come over with my husband. Ted has a job here. We're going to be staying for a few years so we're looking for a house to rent. I'm Lorna, and that's my son, Chris. Hi.'

I put my hand out, but she looks at it confused. I take it back; people here don't shake hands, I guess.

'Oh... yes, hello. I'm Sandra.'

'Do you live in Buxton?'

'No, not any more. I did. Just back for a while. I like to be in the gardens. I used to bring my son here as well. He loved to feed the the ducks and go boating on the lake.'

'Yeah, it's a really nice place, feels safe.' I look out for Chris and see he is on the swings now, his yellow shorts flying up and down like a butterfly over the huge blue-grey flower on the surface of the playground. 'Is your son at school?'

'Oh no, he's all grown up now with kids of his own.'

'You don't look old enough!' I mean it as well. She must have been a child bride. Or I want some of the moisturiser she uses.

'He lives in Australia now.'

'Don't you miss him? Do you go see him often?' Then I remember she doesn't fly. Maybe she has a phobia. That must be awful.

‘No, I don’t get to see him. Not in the flesh. But he’s happy, has a lovely family. It’s enough for me to know that. I realised a long time ago that’s what’s important. It’s his life, not mine. At least I know I did a good job.’

I feel tears welling up. That’s all I’ve been able to think about: Mom and Dad. They’d said, “No problem, you have to go. It’s going to be exciting, don’t worry about us. We can FaceTime, come over for vacations. You’ve given Dad an excuse to visit Stratford on Avon and London.” I thought they were just putting on a brave face. I look at Sandra and wish she’d take off her sunglasses. They make her look so distant.

‘You really feel that? That it’s okay whether you can see him or not? What about your grandchildren?’

‘Oh, they’re like any kids. They get told lots about me but they have their own lives and friends. I had my small influence on their dad. He has his own turn now.’

She seems so quiet and accepting. I turn with that mother’s instinct, and Chris is running towards us laughing. I stand up arms outstretched to catch him and swing him around.

‘Chris, this is Sandra. Say Hi.’ I look up. The bench is empty.

Chris looks at me worriedly.

‘Who’s Sandra?’

‘Jeez! She’s gone. Must’ve been in a hurry. Oh well. Let’s go get some ice-cream.’

We walk to the cafe and I think of what she said. I feel better. I can see our enjoying life here.

We pass a display of black and white photographs, the gardens in the past. As my eye skips over the Victorian and war-time scenes, I stop and study a couple that must be from the sixties or seventies. Women pushing big strollers. One woman, you can only see her back: a big hat and short sundress with flowers. Funny how fashions return.

‘Mom...’

‘Coming. Ask the lady for Raspberry Ripple.’

Very British.