



# DIGGING DEEPER SERIES

# 2

## Buxton's late 18<sup>th</sup> century "water cure"

The Crescent was developed in Buxton by the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire at a time when it was fashionable to visit spas because of a belief that bathing in, and drinking, rich mineral waters could bring relief to a number of ailments and conditions common at the time. However, was there any evidence that the waters really did deliver the relief that was expected and was there more to "the cure" than merely drinking and bathing in the water?

### Background

It is interesting to note that the water that flows out of the St Ann's well today probably fell from the sky at roughly the same time as man's earliest use of the water in the Neolithic period about 5,000 years ago. The spiritual importance attached to the water was certainly recognised by the Romans when they settled here 3,000 years later and it has enjoyed a reputation for its healing qualities ever since.

Such was this reputation that Mary Queen of Scots, during her captivity by the Earl of Shrewsbury, requested to be allowed to use the waters for relief from her various rheumatic ailments over a ten-year period from 1574 to 1584. In fact, it was around this time, 1572, that the first scientific treatise on the value of the water, *The Benefit of the Ancient Baths of Buckstones*, was published by Dr John Jones. This was not entirely coincidental as Dr Jones was a close friend of the Earl of Shrewsbury who was investing in the well and bathing facilities and was keen to promote their use.

This investment, and accompanying publicity, were successful as Buxton's mineral waters gained status as one of the Peak District's "wonders" in the various travelling guides published including Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (1622), Hobbes' *De Mirabilibus Pecci* (c.1627) and Cotton's *The Wonders of the Peak* (1681).

However, although the naturally warm water was believed at the time to be heated by an underground fire, and the ability to sample them was an attraction in its own right, it was the general health-giving qualities of the water that attracted the most attention.

## **Buxton's reputation for health**

Peter Collinge's paper "*I swim like a frog that has lost the use of its hind legs': the pursuit of health and leisure in Buxton 1781-90* (2017) addresses the reputation that Buxton retained for its medical and health giving benefits, not only of its waters, but its clean dry air and the potential offered for outdoor activities and excursions. This compares with a trend towards social and leisure seeking justifications for visiting many of the other UK spas as the 18<sup>th</sup> century progressed.

His thesis is nuanced, however, in that there was often an overlap between a genuine need to seek relief and the nature of the invalid's complaint. By this is meant that certain conditions, such as rheumatism and gout, were signifiers of rank as they were as a consequence of an excessive lifestyle. Therefore it was socially acceptable, or even advantageous, to be seen to be suffering and seeking relief with these conditions.

Another advantage of Buxton, discussed by Collinge, is its remote location which required a romantically hazardous (and hence expensive) route in order to visit it. He suggests that this lent a desirable sense of exclusivity to the town and allowed a number of well publicised "picturesquely beautiful" points of interest to be visited en route. In effect, the Peak District provided a sort of "grand tour" in microcosm with Buxton at its heart. To visit the spa was part of a wider experience, the partaking in which was a conspicuous display of status.

## **Taking the "water cure"**

Medical science in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was still based on ideas that the Ancient Greek writers such as Hippocrates would have recognised. It revolved around the principle that health was a natural state of the body and that disease or illness was largely caused by some sort of internal malfunction. In this context, it is easy to understand the premise that the waters had the ability to cure disease by diluting the problem and flushing it away through the body's natural waste systems. There was also a belief that the body's skin was porous and that this partially explained the ability of water to relieve symptoms through bathing.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century "cure" was therefore largely based around drinking and bathing in water. To the extent that there was any real science behind this, a number of accounts contain extensive chemical analyses of the make-up of the waters. These included Dr Thomas Short's *Mineral Waters* (1734), Dr Alexander Hunter's *A Treatise on the Nature and Virtues of Buxton Waters* (1761) and Dr Joseph Denman's *Observations on the Effects of Buxton Water* (1793). These analyses were accompanied by self-help guides as to how to use the waters to best effect to treat popular conditions of the time including stomach disorders, gout, rheumatism, palsy, diseases of the skin and "paralytic disorders".

A good example of this can be found in Dr Thomas Page's exhaustively titled guide: *The Buxton Bather's Handbook: or, brief observations on the Buxton Waters with a few general directions on their use; to which are added, rules for gouty and rheumatic patients during their convalescence* (1832). This ran into many editions and contained his five rules for bathing:

1. To bathe about the middle of the day
2. To go into the bath when the body is warm
3. To go into the bath feet first
4. To remain in the water at first but a very short time
5. To bathe on alternate days or to omit every third day

## Regimen

18<sup>th</sup> century medical thinking wasn't entirely based around the internal workings of the body and there was a recognition that environmental and behavioural factors, what we today would refer to as an individual's "lifestyle", played a part. Hence the water cure would only be effective if it formed part of a daily regimen of healthy living which included taking in fresh air, having exercise in the open air, keeping regular hours, relaxing by excursions or engaging in cultural activities and eating and drinking in moderation.

That this should be part of the cure shouldn't be surprising given that many of the conditions in the patients presenting themselves would, by today's standards, be easily linked to an excessive and unhealthy lifestyle and lack of personal hygiene.

Regarding diet, Dr Page's *Bathers' Handbook* sets out dietary advice for gouty and rheumatic patients for breakfast, dinner and tea. Gout is the complaint that attracts the greatest amount of advice from the various doctors. Dr Denman offers further advice about when to bathe if suffering from this particular condition:

*"The hour of bathing for gouty patients, should be between breakfast and dinner in general, but, in some cases, the evening will be preferable, taking afterwards a light supper, with a little wine, if the constitution and former habits of living require it". (Page, 1832)*

Dr Denman also sets out advice on how much water to drink for any patient – two glasses (each a third of a pint) should be drunk at 40-minute intervals before breakfast and a further two glasses between breakfast and dinner. He also advises that the time between breakfast and dinner (ie early afternoon) should be used for exercise prior to bathing.

Buxton was particularly attractive as a place that, by virtue of its location, offered clean pure air and the chance to engage in healthy outdoor pursuits. Indeed, these outdoor pursuits were so successfully taken up that some accounts of the balls in the Assembly Rooms were recorded as having a disappointing lack of men who were clearly exhausted by a day's shooting or fishing!

Other contemporary writers were well aware of the natural advantage of Buxton. Daniel Defoe described it in 1727 and suggested that the town had the advantage of being situated in 'open country' and was, therefore, more 'conductive to health' than a closed city such as Bath and he went on to describe the noxious state of the latter city. Over 70 years later, Anna Seward, a regular visitor to Buxton, wrote to a Rev. TS Whalley on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1800 and was also comparing the local waters to those at Bath and commented:

*“The Buxton waters are of resembling, though gentler effects [than Bath], with the superior advantage of a pure mountainous air, sharp, but bracing, free from noxious city-effluvia, and from the no less noxious influence of too luxuriant vegetation.” (Seward, 1811)*

Aside from its pure air, Buxton’s remoteness and location in an open mountainous setting offered other advantages. Whereas it could not compete with some of the larger spas in terms of its urban facilities, it could offer the sublimity and romance of the wild Peak District countryside to stimulate the mind with its easily reachable attractions such as Poole’s Hole (today’s Poole’s Cavern), Lovers Leap and, further afield, Chatsworth and the caves of Castleton.

“Taking the cure” was, in many ways, a misnomer. At best, the recommended regimen would offer relief from painful symptoms but could not provide a cure as medical science in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had not developed sufficiently to do so. This would not prevent the physicians of the day making it sound more scientific and sophisticated. The authors of the various guides to Buxton’s waters were, in the main, practising physicians who resided in the town during the season. As such, the underlying message contained in the guides is that, in order to fully realise the benefits of “the cure”, patients should seek specialist medical advice. They were, in effect, prospectuses to generate business. As an indication of this, the count of surgeons, physicians and apothecaries in Buxton rose from 7 in 1818 to 13 in 1850.

Unlike Bath, Buxton was certainly a resort that would have been more likely have been chosen for medical and convalescent reasons than social. Dr Denman, who, like some of the other physicians writing about the merits of Buxton’s waters, clearly has little time for the fashionable aspects, saying that whereas many people attend “watering places” as a matter of fashion, this as often “an improper desertion of business and family affairs”.

This issue of “fashion” is an interesting one. Reference has already been made to the range of medical conditions and ailments being a consequence of a typically excessive Georgian lifestyle. To that extent, to come to Buxton and present some of the conditions was a sign that they could afford the excessive lifestyle in the first place. Looked at in that way, it would not have been seen as embarrassing to be seeking the cure. However, there are contemporary accounts of invalids who are confined to their rooms as their condition renders them incapable of engaging in the healthy active pursuits or even just going out to take the air. Given this, the social side of the town with its thrice weekly balls in the Assembly Rooms and the thriving theatre in Spring Gardens, must have been patronised by sufficient number of visitors who were not too incapacitated. They had therefore come to the town purely for social reasons or to engage in a few days or weeks enjoying a change of scenery, society and lifestyle. For them, they would be visiting a spa for very similar reasons to those visiting a spa today.

## References

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