



DIGGING DEEPER SERIES

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A brief history of Buxton's Crescent: Part 1 - 1789-1989

On visiting Buxton in 1783, the Duchess of Devonshire wrote to her mother, the Countess Spencer, *"I never saw anything so magnificent as the Crescent tho' it must half ruin me – my spirit makes me delight in the Duke doing it"*.

The Duke was William Cavendish, the 5th Duke of Devonshire who, along with his architect, John Carr of York, was embarking on a project to create a fashionable northern Georgian spa town to rival the established spas in the south of England at Bath, Tunbridge Wells and Cheltenham.

Background

The Duke was opening a new chapter in Buxton's long association with its source of thermal natural mineral water. The town is situated over a geological fault that separates carboniferous limestone, to its south and east in the White Peak, from the gritstone, to its north and west in the Dark Peak. It is from this fault that the mineral rich water rises.

The value of the water source was recognised by the Romans who established one of only two settlements in Britain which were developed entirely around their thermal natural mineral water springs. Roman Buxton was known as *Aquae Arnemetiae* whilst Roman Bath, the other settlement, was known as *Aquae Sulis*.

Although falling into relative obscurity after the Romans left, the thermal springs still served as a place of medieval pilgrimage. In fact, such was its popularity by the 16th century that Thomas Cromwell ordered the dismantling of the shrine at St Anne's Well known as a "place of many miracles" in 1536. However, his efforts were very much in vain as, by 1568, the well had been restored and bathing in nearby baths adjoining Buxton Hall (today's Old Hall Hotel) was becoming popular. By this time, the 6th Earl of Shrewsbury, George Talbot, had improved the hall in preparation for holding Mary Queen of Scots captive on the orders of Queen Elizabeth. The Earl moved Mary around various properties in his ownership and she was known to have made a number of visits to Buxton from 1572 to 1584 to derive benefit for her rheumatism from the water

George Talbot had married Elizabeth Cavendish, better known as Bess of Hardwick, in 1568. This was a relationship that brought together two very important land-owning families. One of Bess's sons, William Cavendish from an earlier marriage, became the 1st Earl of Devonshire. By the end of the 17th century, the 4th Earl was created as the 1st Duke of Devonshire. By the middle of the 18th century, most of the land in the town was owned by the Cavendish family and it was the 5th Duke that saw the commercial opportunity to develop Buxton as a fashionable Georgian spa town.

The Fifth Duke's vision and the Crescent's first golden age

Buxton was already a destination for visitors. Having read such writers as Hobbes (1678) and Cotton (1725), outdoor thrill seekers and romantics were exploring the "Wonders of the Peak" which included the St Ann's Well in Buxton. In addition, the Well and the town's early rudimentary baths continued to attract invalids striving for relief from rheumatism and other common ailments. Whereas there was accommodation available, including the Buxton Hall and coaching inns such as the Grove Hotel and the Eagle & Child, the offer lacked the opulence that would be necessary to attract the Duke's target market – the fashionable set who could afford to use the proposed new spa. This led him to appoint John Carr of York to design an array of suitably attractive facilities.

The choice of John Carr, whose fame at the time of his appointment was more regional than national, was interesting given that the Duke, probably one of the wealthiest men in the country at the time, could have appointed any one of the other more instantly recognisable architects of the day. However, Carr's suitability for the task becomes apparent when his background and experience are examined: he suffered from chronic rheumatism and was familiar with the Buxton 'cure' having taken the waters in 1775; he had already enjoyed a long working relationship with the Duke's brother-in-law, the 3rd Duke of Portland; and, perhaps the most significant qualification of all, like both Dukes, he was an ardent Whig. In fact, the Duke had been introduced to Carr whilst visiting the Marquis of Rockingham, a Whig grandee and former Prime Minister, at his home at Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire. Carr had been commissioned by the Marquis to undertake some alterations to his property and he went on to undertake some repairs and redecoration work at Chatsworth for the Duke. They were therefore well acquainted by the time of his commission at Buxton in 1779.

Ivan Hall, in his book, *Georgian Buxton* (1984), examines, in some detail, Carr's development of his plan in response to the Duke's commission. This includes the prospect of a far larger project that was, allegedly, thwarted by the owner of a small, but necessary, parcel of land trying to capitalise on its pivotal position. A further, more elaborate, scheme to improve the baths had to be abandoned because of site difficulties. However, Carr's architectural centrepiece would be a complex of five lodging houses and two hotels in the form of a Crescent, a fashionable building form of the day. The Crescent would be built so as to adjoin the refurbished baths at its west end. The hotels would book-end the lodging houses with the St Ann's Hotel in the west end of the building and the Great Hotel in the east end. One of the lodging houses would be initially kept as a town house for the Duke so as to establish the social success of the venture. Of the two hotels, the Great Hotel was to be the

grander of the two, incorporating a lavishly decorated Ballroom and an adjoining Card Room – together known as the Assembly Rooms where the town's visitors could gather for balls during the season. A feature of his plan, given that he had had to scale down his proposals for refurbishing the baths, was to link them together with the Crescent's hotel and lodging house entrances and a parade of six shops, to the Assembly Rooms at the other end via a covered arcade or promenade.

In addition to the Crescent, Carr convinced the Duke that visitors to the town would be attracted by his proposed lavish and elaborate stabling provision, the Great Stables. This would house 120 horses at ground floor level with stable hands sleeping in lofts above. The stables were situated away from the Crescent to avoid noise and smells and were to be based around a central grazing area and feature another arcade. In fact, this arcade was actually a circus, being circular and circumnavigating the central area so as to exercise the horses when the weather prevented venturing further afield.

The total investment in Buxton was in the order of £60,000 for which the Duke got two hotels, five lodging houses, five shops, a remodelled baths complex, the Great Stables and the refurbishment of several inns. By contemporary standards, this was quite an investment but one of the reasons why he was able to afford it related to the fact that he owned land at Ecton, not far away in Staffordshire, under which very high-quality copper deposits were found and mined. By the time of his plans to develop Buxton, the demand for copper had grown exponentially due to the new practice of sheathing or 'copper bottoming' ships in the Royal Navy to protect their hulls and to enable them to sail faster. It is said that his profits in one year alone from this mine were sufficient to build the Crescent.

Architecturally, the Crescent is built on a perfectly semi-circular floorplan which differs from the more common elliptical floorplans of crescents found in Bath and Edinburgh. Initially, it looked over a rocky hillside, St Ann's Cliff, before Sir Jeffry Wyatville landscaped it in 1818 as The Slopes (initially called The Terraces) which features a series of concentric semi-circular paths that precisely mirror the Crescent's floorplan. The Crescent's front and side elevations are dominated by the soaring doric pilasters which sit under a heavily overhanging cornice and over the rusticated stonework of the colonnade to the covered promenade. The top of the elevation has a balustrade with the ducal arms carved by Thomas Waterworth of Doncaster and incorporating real stags' antlers (originally supplied from Chatsworth but replaced by antlers from Lyme Park in 1994). The same balustrade continues around the rear convex elevation. This elevation is planer, with coursed squared rubble stone replacing the ashlar of the front, but is designed to be seen, being in the centre of town and at the foot of a hill. This shows that the Crescent was designed to be seen 'in the round' rather than in the more traditional sense of having a public front and a private back.

Carr was also aware that the roof of the Crescent could be seen from even further up the hill and so he gathered the chimney flues together in a series of massive cruciform stacks. Earlier images of the building will show these stacks to be a principal feature of the building from all viewpoints given their scale, rhythm and decoration. Unfortunately, for reasons lost in time, the cruciform stacks were taken down and rebuilt to a lesser height and simpler detail in the 1930s. The only surviving stacks to the original height and detail are the

straight stacks at either end, the west stack being complete with some of the original stone pots.

Hotels – still a new concept in the UK

Up until the early part of the 18th century, travellers around Britain would have stayed at inns or, if particularly well connected, in the local hall. However, this was also the time of the *Grand Tour*, a popular expedition for the upper classes to explore the artistic and architectural wonders of Europe - Italy in particular. Here, the travellers were experiencing 'hotels' – a new form of premium accommodation incorporating a whole range of public rooms – libraries, smoking rooms, billiards rooms, coffee lounges, as well as bedrooms and dining rooms. Some of the first buildings in the UK designed as 'hotels' date from the 1760s – the Royal Clarence Hotel in Exeter, 1769 (but badly damaged by a fire in 2016), claims to be the first business referred to as a hotel. Being built in the 1780s, therefore, the St Ann's Hotel and the Great Hotel were amongst the first hotels in the country.

Lodging houses

During the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century, Buxton became full of lodging houses. The lodging houses in the Crescent were designed to reach the widest market possible by providing better quality rooms at the front of the building and cheaper rooms at the back. In fact, in order to maximise the lettable space, an extra floor was squeezed in, giving four floors at the back whilst only three floors at the front.

Ideally, residents would want to receive guests during the day so a common letting arrangement in the lodging house would be a suite of rooms with an entrance lobby, a day room and a bedroom – all with interconnecting doors. Residents would pay rent by the room so, should they not be able to afford all three rooms, some of the interconnecting doors could be closed and locked.

On the rear of the Crescent, the smaller rooms incorporated a recess in which a narrow bed (similar to a modern day single-sized bed) could be accommodated and curtained off during the day when visitors were received.

The dining room provided the only communal facility in a lodging house to the rear of the Crescent on the ground floor. As today, the ground floor front was occupied by small shops.

The Assembly Rooms

The Assembly Rooms consist of the Great Ballroom and the Card Room. These are the 'state rooms' of the complex designed to be the most public and, therefore, the most sumptuous. Balls were held up to three times weekly during the season and in order to gain access, guests would pay a subscription. The original subscription book, which gives a fascinating insight into the sort of people coming to Buxton at the time is kept at the Museum and Art Gallery.

Buxton started off attracting people from the highest levels of society. The Countess of Derby heads the list of subscribers on the Assembly Rooms' opening night followed by the Duke of Manchester, the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, Lord Drogheda, the Earl of Shrewsbury and a long list of members of the aristocracy plus the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Construction of the Crescent

Site work on the Crescent started in 1780 and the building was completed in 1789. Its construction took longer than might have been expected on account of Buxton's cold climate which meant that the building work was seasonal and all new wall tops were thatched for protection from frost.

Before the actual building works started, some major engineering operations had to be completed. Firstly, the River Wye, which ran through the intended site in a west-east direction, had to be diverted into a culvert further north so as to run behind the Crescent and, secondly, the main Manchester Road had to be diverted. At the start of the construction, the road ran in a north-south direction, crossing over the River Wye, past the George Hotel and up to the Market Place via what is today's Hall Bank. To accommodate Carr's plans for the Crescent and the new baths, the road had to be diverted to run parallel to the north side of the, now, culverted river and then cross it further east close to Spring Gardens. Only then could Carr start to build off the old riverbed and move towards working above ground. It was recorded that Roman lead lined baths were discovered in the course of digging foundations, but these were discarded such was the desire to progress with the build.

Carr, who was a trained stonemason, gave great consideration to the choice of stone for the building. Local quarries in Buxton and further afield in Derbyshire provided him with a wide selection of sandstones (gritstones) with varying properties to fit the task in hand. Ivan Hall has examined the details of the construction process:

Some quarries were already open, some had to be opened and tested, or have access roads built to reach them ... For the convex north elevation of the Crescent, a good walling stone was sufficient, but for more ornamental or more vulnerable work other stone types were needed. A stone that turned well was required for the balusters, other sorts for the great overhanging cornice, the fluted pilasters or the window lintels, etc. Thus the Buxton quarries provided the general walling, Bakewell Edge the balusters and steps, Matlock the staircase landings and so forth. Other quarries included Youlgreave, Crackenedge, Chelmorton, Chinley and Mosten.

There was so little locally produced timber that virtually all had to be imported via Hull, transported inland along the Humber, the Trent, the Chesterfield Canal from Stockwith. The Westmorland slate from Rigge's quarry also came by sea to Hull and then by river, but a later consignment came via the Bridgewater Canal and Manchester. (Hall, 1984)

It is clear from Hall's study that the carcass of the building was completed as an entity and then the tradesmen moved in to start work on the interior. From here on, it is more difficult

to determine the exact order of completion of the various parts of the building. Some of the simpler lodging houses were completed earlier and the final part to be internally completed was the Ballroom.

Structurally, the building has a central spine wall and a series of radial walls defining the lodging houses and hotels. As already mentioned, an additional floor is squeezed into the rear of the lodging houses. Carr was quite innovative with some of the construction details in an attempt to minimise the ongoing maintenance costs of the building. He sought to achieve this by specifying the right materials, as above, but also unusual details such as a cast iron window cill which he thought would withstand Buxton's damp weather more readily than conventional timber. Some of these still survive as does a wrought iron 'plate course' along with iron 'chain-courses' embedded into the stone of the rear convex elevation— all designed to brace the building together.

All of the staircases are stone – cantilevered from the adjoining walls and having simple wrought iron banisters made by Thomas Smith of Chesterfield. Hall sets out some further details from his study of the building accounts kept at Chatsworth:

In July 1786, the Ballroom chandeliers arrived from London ... The architect normally preferred to encourage local suppliers, but provincial firms were of small size, and this affected their competitiveness in all but price. Moreover, many noble patrons felt under some obligation to employ the firms in their locality, though where high fashion was also a factor, then it could be sensible to buy in London or divide an order. Hence the purchase from Walter Wilson in London of chairs for the Ballroom at £38, while the 'Sofas, Carpets, Window Curtains and Card Tables' came from Walker of Manchester, at £308.1.0. The three large mirrors came from The Glass Company at a cost of £117.16.3, but a Mr Dodrick Smith supplied further 'Glasses, Gilt Girandoles and Lamps' for £69.17.0. In the following year, 1788, Mr Parker sent from London a series of Lamps to be used within the Arcade, perhaps the William Parker who had so recently supplied the chandelier for Carr's Drawing Room at Chatsworth and perhaps the two chandeliers still in the Great Room at Buxton. (Hall, 1984)

The Ballroom was the architectural climax of the whole complex and, to this day, is recognised as one of Carr's most successful designs in terms of its scale, proportions and detail. Like Newark Town Hall in Nottinghamshire, which he completed just before Buxton, the design of the plasterwork in this room was heavily influenced by Robert Adam (although he had no direct involvement), thus panels of decoration are framed and deliberately varied in design. Carr brought his plasterer, James Henderson, from York to undertake this work.

The Ballroom's classical order was Corinthian, as was common for this type of room at the time. Equally common was the desire to allow design and the need for symmetry to champion function. Hence the two pairs of Corinthian columns, which appear to support their respective entablatures on which the ceiling is carried are, in fact, of a hollow non-load bearing timber construction. What's more, they hang from the entablatures which turn out to be boxing for a queen post truss. Also, two of the five sets of beautifully crafted inlaid mahogany doors, merely lead to corner cupboards.

It is thought (RCHME, 1996) that the Duke instructed Carr to incorporate a ballroom as a late design change as, when studied closely, it doesn't fit very well into the overall plan and design of the building. There are more windows on the outside than the inside as some were blocked as being unnecessary. Also, the entrance leading to the Grand Staircase up to the Assembly Rooms, which is probably the most important entrance in the entire building, is the only one that does not neatly fit behind an arch.

The white marble fireplaces in the Ballroom were carved by Richard Maile of London whereas those in the adjoining Card Room, and some other public rooms are all carved by Thomas Waterworth from polished limestone quarried from the Duke's "Once a Week" quarry at Sheldon. As Hall points out, the limestone reveals thousands of fossils feeding the Georgians' fascination with "petrification" – a fascination that also filled the many souvenir shops in Buxton at the time.

The Crescent - a commercial venture?

Aside from the architecture, the Duke faced a difficult business decision – did he fill his new Crescent entirely with hotels in an attempt to attract the very wealthiest guests and therefore charge a sizeable premium; or did he pitch his market lower by providing good quality, but more basic, accommodation in the form of lodging houses? In the end, he compromised and commissioned Carr to incorporate both. On completion, the Duke retained the freehold and let the building out as 6 tenancies – the St Ann's Hotel and lodging house 1 which were let together, the Great Hotel and the remaining four lodging houses. He retained the central lodging house as his own town house.

The development was immediately a huge social success with commentators of the day being largely complimentary. From the start, it was also a commercial success with the hotel, rather than the lodging house, proving to be the better model. In fact, by the time of its completion, foreign travel was so hindered by Britain's war with France that English tourism was given a welcome fillip and the Duke saw fit to expand his hotels to embrace the lodging houses whilst creating a third hotel in the centre from his former town house.

However, fashions were already changing. It is worth noting that Bath's popularity had reached its peak a good forty years ahead of Buxton which was entering the market at a time when seaside resorts and sea bathing were starting to lure the fashionable set away from spas. Balls continued to be held two to three times a week in the Assembly Rooms until 1840 by which time the list of subscribers had fallen to single digits and it then became the dining room of the Great Hotel.

Decline

The Crescent continued to be entirely in hotel and retail use up until the early 20th century. At the east end, the Great Hotel had reopened as the Crescent Hotel in 1878 but this closed in 1935 when it became used, first as a clinic specialising in treatment for rheumatism, and

then, following the establishment of the National Health Service in 1948, part of the Devonshire Royal Hospital until 1966. It remained empty for four years until Derbyshire County Council acquired it in 1970 at which point it was extensively renovated (1970-73) to create a library and council offices. Unfortunately, by the early 1990s, further structural problems were discovered, and the Council was forced to relocate out of the building.

The St Ann's Hotel, at the west end of the Crescent, continued in family ownership until it was sold to a national hotel chain in 1986. Decades of inadequate maintenance and a lack of serious investment resulted in the local authority having to serve public health notices on the new owners. Rather than addressing the state of the kitchens, it closed for a full refurbishment scheme, which never materialised, and its 200-year history finally came to an end. Unfortunately, this part of the building quickly fell into serious decline as gales took off parts of its roof in 1990 and water started to pour in.

Part 2 sets out what happened to the Crescent next and how this nationally important building was saved.

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