



DIGGING DEEPER SERIES

4

A brief history of Buxton's Crescent: Part 2 - 1989-2020

The Crescent was designed by John Carr of York in response to a commission by the Fifth Duke of Devonshire. Built between 1780 and 1789, it was the centrepiece of the Duke's plan to develop a northern spa town to take advantage of Buxton's source of thermal natural mineral water and to vie with the existing fashionable Georgian spas in the south of England.

The earlier history of the Crescent is covered in the Digging Deeper Series Paper 3 *A brief history of Buxton's Crescent Part 1 – 1789-1989*. This paper takes up the building's story from 1989 to the present day during which the building fell empty and in disrepair prior to being rescued as part of the Buxton Crescent and Thermal Spa project.

Background

In the last paper, the Crescent's development as a complex of two hotels, six lodging houses and a parade of shops was described. Although some of the earliest changes involved the expansion of the two hotels to take over all of the lodging houses, the complex continued to be entirely in hotel and retail use up until the early 20th century.

At the east end, the Great Hotel had started to trade 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 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 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, the hotel was closed

pending 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 February 1990 and water started to pour in.

Urgent repair works: 1994-96

The speed at which an empty historic building can deteriorate once it falls out of use is always a cause of great concern, especially when it is a grade 1 listed building.

Historic buildings can be protected by their inclusion on the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Historic and Architectural Interest. Buildings are added to the list by the relevant government department on the recommendation of Historic England and, once included, they are graded 1, 2* or 2. There are approximately 500,000 buildings on the list in England of which just 2.5%, approximately 12,500, are included as grade 1 as these are considered to be of exceptional interest and of significant national importance. Owners are urged to keep their buildings in good repair and, should they fail to do this, a local authority can intervene in one of two ways. It can try to enforce the owner to undertake temporary works to keep the building wind proof, watertight and secure by giving notice that it will undertake the works on the owner's behalf and will seek to recover the cost. Alternatively, in extreme circumstances, it can serve a notice requiring full and permanent repair works for the building's proper preservation are carried out. This latter measure, involving considerably higher costs, is normally a route taken where the present owner is unable to repair the building themselves and where compulsory purchase would be the preferred route so as to place the building into the hands of an owner with adequate resources to preserve it.

It was evident that the circumstances with the St Ann's Hotel justified the more draconian full repair route. The building needed a new roof, extensive repairs to its stonework and joinery and measures to check the spread of dry rot internally – all of which were estimated to cost approximately £1 million. Should the relevant local authority (High Peak Borough Council) act on its own to pursue this, it could end up acquiring a building with a repairs liability that would be, in this case, well beyond the Council's means. Instead, and with the support of Derbyshire County Council and Historic England (then known as English Heritage), a case was made to the Secretary of State for the Environment to intervene using default powers under the legislation. This was not to prove very easy. Although the listed building legislation had existed since 1947, the default powers had never been used and so, if the Secretary of State was to intervene, a legal precedent would be created which could expose the government to numerous similar requests for intervention on other problem historic buildings across the country.

It is quite possible that the case would have ended there had it not been, by a fortunate coincidence, that the governmental responsibility for listed buildings was changed in 1992 to the newly created role of Secretary of State for National Heritage. Legal precedents notwithstanding, here was a Secretary of State eager to establish his new role. Following his service of the notice requesting the full repairs to be undertaken, a draft compulsory purchase notice was served in 1993. By this stage, the private owners were prepared to sell by negotiation. The National Heritage Memorial Fund provided the funds for the acquisition of the building by High Peak Borough Council and Historic England was sanctioned to fund

the full cost of the repairs via the largest grant, £1 million, that it had ever given for an individual building at the time. It later granted a further £500,000 to Derbyshire County Council to complete the repairs of its end.

The County Council's part of the Crescent was occupied as offices and the town's library. It was in the former Ballroom, without doubt the most historically significant room in the entire complex, where the structural issues arose.

The two sets of Corinthian columns in the Ballroom were originally designed to be non-loadbearing. They are of a hollow timber construction and hang from the two cross beams which form part of the structure supporting the Ballroom's ceiling. This whole structure was designed to be independent of the main roof structure above it. However, "spreading" (ie flattening) of the roof over the years and the softening of 18th century roof timbers, which were bearing on the damp external walls, meant that the roof structure dropped down slightly and transferred a load through the Corinthian columns which, in turn, were pressed into the Ballroom floor. At the time when this was discovered (conveniently by carpet fitters who, on their hands and knees, notice the severe deflection of the floor), the Ballroom was used as the reading room of the library and was full of heavy bookshelves. The County Council's structural engineers immediately closed the library and the heavily loaded bookshelves were hurriedly removed forcing a relocation of the library out of the building in 1992.

The works to both ends of the Crescent were undertaken between 1994-96.

Marketing the building: 1996 – 2000

Following the change of ownership in 1993, the whole of the Crescent, Natural Baths and the Pump Room was in the combined ownership of Derbyshire County Council and High Peak Borough Council. This enabled the two Councils to work together, seamlessly, to secure the future of the complex. Having completed the urgent repairs, they embarked on a marketing campaign to invite proposals for the buildings. Unfortunately, despite two attempts, very little interest was shown – the cost of the internal refurbishment was not attractive and neither was the local economy in Buxton at the time.

One scheme which did come forward involved the baths being re-opened, the Pump Room being used as a café and the Crescent converted into retirement flats. However, to render the scheme commercially viable, it required substantial public grant support. The developer, Monumental Trust, had applied to the Sports, Arts and Heritage Lottery Funds. The Sports and Arts Lottery Funds rejected the scheme whilst the Heritage Lottery Fund (now called the National Lottery Heritage Fund) approved a grant to fund a feasibility study to examine, amongst other things, whether the proposed uses were the most suitable for the building - both architecturally and economically. The feasibility study was submitted in April 2000 and its key conclusions were that the residential conversion involved an excessive re-ordering of the building's interior that was damaging to its historic character, in addition to which, it failed to find an acceptable use for the Assembly Rooms. Economically, the preferred option for the building was for hotel rather than residential use, particularly if the

hotel could attract a new niche market based around the adjoining baths complex and the town's source of thermal natural mineral water .

Based on the study's conclusions, the Monumental Trust decided that they would withdraw their project – it could not be delivered without grant funding and they did not wish to pursue a scheme in which the principal use was a hotel.

The Buxton Crescent and Thermal Spa Project: 2000 onwards

The conclusion of the feasibility study regarding the preferred use of the buildings, economically, needed to be set against the wider context of Buxton which was changing:

- The town's heritage-led regeneration was already well underway. High Peak Borough Council and Derbyshire County Council had committed themselves to huge investments, with Historic England and NLHF grant aid, in a number of projects including the restoration of The Slopes and Pavilion Gardens and the ongoing refurbishment of the Buxton Opera House
- Early discussions were already taking place with the University of Derby regarding the conversion of the Devonshire Royal Hospital into a new campus for its hospitality and tourism schools and proposals to run the UK's only spa management course from the building.
- High Peak Borough Council was reviewing whether the town was deriving sufficient benefits from its source of thermal natural mineral water. This was in the light of the English Tourism Council report, published 2002, promoting the regeneration of spa towns and the corresponding Thermae Spa project at Bath aimed at spearheading such a revival.

Against this background, the Councils and the NLHF were very enthusiastic about combining the Crescent's future use with the Natural Baths and the Pump Room to create one of the UK's first genuine spa hotels along with a visitor centre and an element of retail use. However, recognising that this was an ambitious vision for the buildings and the town, it was agreed that the two Councils should promote the scheme, to be known as the Buxton Crescent and Thermal Spa Project, in partnership with a private sector developer. Whilst, today, it is a common arrangement for the NLHF to contract with both the public and private sectors working jointly to deliver a project in partnership; in the early 1990s, this was new territory as most of the large projects being funded by the lottery then involved public sector clients only.

The global growth in thermal natural mineral water spas

As it is not a protected or legally defined term, the public understanding of a 'spa' has widened in recent years to refer to a whole range of meanings – hence, many large hotels market their swimming pools and fitness suites as spas as do the high street beauty salons, tanning salons and nail bars. However, a spa, in the traditional sense, refers to a place where a range of treatments, specifically related to the individual qualities of a source of natural mineral water, is offered.

The culture of spa treatments had largely disappeared in the UK following the establishment of the National Health Service in 1948. Despite attempts by the many spa towns to have their facilities recognised by the NHS for medical treatment, this was not to be. However, on continental Europe and elsewhere, it continued to thrive long enough to capture the huge rise in demand for 'lifestyle', rather than the traditional 'medical' markets. Recent decades have seen a huge increase in demand from people who wished to take advantage of the therapeutic value of water for its own sake rather than as a treatment for a medical condition.

The potential for England's spas to enter into this new market was recognised by the city of Bath which was developing its own Thermae Spa project. The scheme was designed to spearhead the revival of natural mineral water spas in the UK and, after it opened in 2006, proved to be very successful.

Putting Buxton back on the international spa map

Major projects, bidding for lottery support, apply in two stages – stage one seeking support in principle with the full detailed project being submitted for consideration at stage two. The Councils secured a stage one approval in 2002 which enabled them to invite tenders from interested commercial partners to work up detailed proposals.

The Councils sought two partners – a property developer with experience of working on complex historic buildings and a commercial hotel and spa operator with experience of working with natural mineral water. Two bids came forward and, following an independent assessment, the Councils were able to appoint the Trevor Osborne Property Group and CP Holdings Ltd in 2003. The Trevor Osborne Property Group had recently completed the transformation of a disused, listed Victorian prison into an award winning 95-bedroom boutique hotel in Oxford. They had already expressed enthusiasm for a spa hotel development in Buxton and had helped the Councils justify that there was now a market for such a development when submitting the Stage 1 lottery bid. CP Holdings Ltd were the owners of one of Europe's largest hotel and spa resort operators (Danubius Hotels and Ensana Health Spa Hotels). The two companies set up a new entity for delivering the Buxton Crescent and Thermal Spa to be known as Buxton Crescent Limited (BCL). Under a Development Agreement with the two Councils, BCL would design and deliver a hotel and spa scheme for the Crescent, Natural Baths and Pump Room. The Councils would secure the public sector funding for the project and, on completion of the building works, would grant a long lease to BCL which would, in turn, grant underleases to the various users of the building.

The BCL proposals involved an 81-bedroom quality hotel (5 star) linked to a state of the art thermal mineral water spa in the Natural Baths, six shops, a visitor centre telling the story of Buxton's spa heritage and a landscaped setting to the buildings. At the time of the bid, a unique feature of the hotel was its internal link to the Natural Baths to allow staying guests to have open access to the spa facilities. In other words, it would have been the first genuine spa hotel to have opened for over the century. However, to maximise the accessibility to the Natural Baths, it would also function as a day spa, allowing anyone to book in for treatments. These proposals were developed and submitted, first for planning

approval, and then to the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic England and the East Midlands Development Agency for funding. All of the approvals were successfully obtained and by 2006, together with funding from the two Councils and the investment by Buxton Crescent Limited, the scheme looked to be ready to proceed. Unfortunately, however, it came up against some major problems which, if not resolved, threatened to jeopardise the entire project.

Protection of the source of natural thermal mineral water

Buxton's source of natural thermal mineral water has been at the heart of its development throughout its history. The right to extract the water from the St Ann's spring was, historically, enjoyed by the Duke of Devonshire but was passed to the emerging local authority, the Buxton Urban District Council, by agreement in the early part of the last century. Today, High Peak Borough Council enjoys this right as the successor authority, with the quantity of water extracted, and the conditions under which this is allowed, carefully controlled via a licence granted to the Council by the Environment Agency.

The bottling of Buxton's water for sale within the town was started by the Buxton Urban District Council and continued as a service until 1948 at which point a private company was permitted to market the product for sale nationally. The permission to sell the water has been sold on many times over as marketing has made it one of the country's best known brands. Today, the permission is owned by Nestle Waters (UK) Ltd which is granted via a contract with High Peak Borough Council.

The construction work involved with the spa element of the project was complex and high risk. The main thermal water spring is located underneath the Natural Baths which was to be converted into a modern, fit for purpose spa alongside the new hotel. Both the spa and the servicing accommodation for the hotel (kitchens and plant rooms) were being squeezed into a small site with all sorts of other limitations – the Natural Baths were known to have significant structural problems, both the baths and the Crescent were listed, a culverted River Wye ran across the back of the site and there was a known 1 in 100 year flood risk that ruled out placing expensive plant or uses in the existing basement areas to the baths or the Crescent.

Whether the new development built upwards, adding a new floor over the single storey baths, or downwards at the rear of the Crescent to create new basement level accommodation for kitchens and plant rooms, major construction works were going to be necessary in the vicinity of the water source. This was a worry to all of the parties – the Councils, the developers and Nestlé – as there was no hydrological expert that would guarantee that any excavation works in the vicinity of the water source would neither divert the flow nor contaminate it.

The issue was only capable of being fully covered by complex, three-way, legal negotiations. This took a considerable amount of time but was finally resolved by an agreement that any work, which involved any digging in the ground, was to be the subject of a method statement to be agreed by the three sets of hydrological specialists representing the Council, the developer and Nestle. It was also decided that the project as a whole should be

'de-risked' by having an initial enabling contract that would cover most of the high-risk digging work carried out. This initial contract took place between 2012-13 and, unfortunately, no water contamination or diversion issues arose.

2007-08 financial crisis and public sector austerity measures

It was vitally important to arrive at a manageable solution to the water protection issue but, unfortunately, the time taken to resolve this took the project through the financial crisis of 2007-08 and the consequent round of public sector austerity measures. This had two direct impacts on the project's funding.

Firstly, a substantial amount of the investment being made by BCL was debt funding using bank loans. Previous to the financial crisis, the banks had indicated support for the project, however, the situation was now fundamentally changed. Whereas the banks were not questioning the viability of the project, they had all, as matters of policy, placed drastic restrictions on the types of projects that they were now prepared to support – and this certainly did not include luxury spa hotels. Fortunately, in 2015, Derbyshire County Council agreed to lend the money to BCL.

The second issue was more difficult to resolve. Following the general election of 2010, the incoming Coalition Government introduced sweeping cutbacks in public sector spending which included the abolition of a network of regional development agencies (RDAs). For the project, this caused a funding issue as the East Midlands Development Agency had committed a grant of £5 million. Despite government assurances that extant RDA grantees would be entitled to bid for a new national fund, the Regional Growth Fund; submissions by the project team in four bidding rounds proved fruitless. The government's replacement structure for enterprise funding saw the establishment of a new network of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) with Buxton being covered by the D2N2 LEP which committed £2 million to the project in 2016.

However, from 2010 onwards, the project was ready to go out to tender in market conditions that were exceptionally volatile. The construction sector was emerging from the financial crisis and demand was catching up with itself so that there was plenty of work available meaning the contractors did not need to get involved with potentially higher risk projects that might expose them to uncontrollable additional costs. The construction sector would always view any scheme involving historic buildings as high risk because of the uncertainty of the problems and issues that might arise in the course of the contract. As has already been explained, despite the earlier enabling contract, there were still risks in the Crescent project associated with the thermal water source. The tenders submitted for the project came in substantially above budget at a time when the original funding gap created by the loss of the RDA money had still not been fully replaced.

The project had no other option but to return to the National Lottery Heritage Fund to ask for a grant increase. The lottery had already generously offered £12.5 million in 2006 but now, the loss of funding together with the steeply rising cost of the project meant that the lottery was asked to nearly double the offer to £23.8 million. This was approved in 2014, much to the relief and gratitude of the rest of the project partners who, themselves, had

also had to increase their investments. At the time of the increased offer, the Heritage Fund grant, in total, was their sixth largest ever offered.

Main building contract and the opening of the hotel and spa 2020

With a new funding package agreed, BCL were now able to enter into contract with Vinci Construction, the same contractors that had completed the enabling package in 2012-13. Works on the main contract started in spring 2016.

As has already been mentioned, any restoration project involving a group of historic buildings will involve considerable risks as it is not until the buildings can be fully opened up that the extent of any physical deterioration of the fabric can be fully established. The Crescent and Thermal Spa project proved to be no exception. In particular, the former St Ann's Hotel end of the Crescent, which was known to have had very little investment in repairs throughout its history, was found to be in very poor structural condition. Although the building's original construction had been designed and the work executed to a high standard, it was the subsequent alterations, some from very early on in its history, that were problematic. Hence, emergency internal scaffolding had to be introduced to prevent one of the main external chimney stacks from collapsing through the building; elsewhere, chimney breasts, removed at ground floor level to create corridors, were left in place in all of the other floors above but with little or no support; and new partition walls had been introduced with no underfloor support.

The building contract, originally planned to last two years, ended up lasting over twice as long with the final 4-month delay to completion being caused by the national lockdown in response to the global Coronavirus pandemic. Notwithstanding all of these problems, the new Crescent Hotel and the adjoining Ensana Health Spa finally opened in September 2020.

Alongside the main contract, BCL had also managed a smaller contract, with Manchester and Cheshire Construction Ltd, to repair and restore the Pump Room. The Pump Room had been closed to the public in 2010 and was last used for 'taking the waters' in the 1980s. The building work started in December 2015 and was completed in early 2017. This allowed the Buxton Crescent Heritage Trust to occupy the building, initially under licence, to run the tourist information centre from the building. However, once the main contract for the Crescent refurbishment had been completed, the Trust entered into a lease arrangement with BCL for the Pump Room and were able to open their new visitor attraction, the Buxton Crescent Story in rooms in the Crescent, to coincide with the opening of the hotel and spa.

Buxton Crescent Heritage Trust

Part of the case put before the National Heritage Lottery Fund regarding the bid for an increased grant was to improve the public access arrangements and to establish a separate charitable trust, the Buxton Crescent Heritage Trust (BCHT), to manage them. The Trust had been established in 2016 and opened the Pump Room as a tourist information centre following its restoration by BCL.

One of the original attractions of promoting a hotel in the Crescent was that, in itself, it would allow more public access than, for example, a conversion into residential use. Paying guests can, of course, stay in the building and non-staying visitors can access the shops, bars and restaurants. However, it was considered that the fascinating story of Buxton's spa heritage, centred on the Crescent and spa buildings, was worth exploring more fully via a dedicated visitor centre. The Trust, therefore, designed and opened the Buxton Crescent Visitor Experience which is based in rooms on the ground floor and basement of the Crescent as well as the Pump Room. In addition, the Trust manages a programme of heritage related events in the Crescent's Assembly Rooms by arrangement with the Crescent Hotel for sixty days each year.

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