

# A Restoration and the Birth of a Festival at Buxton

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Buxton is a very special place. It was a Roman Spa used in Elizabethan times where Mary Queen of Scots took the waters whilst a prisoner at Chatsworth. It had its heyday in the eighteenth century when the Duke of Devonshire built the Crescent and reached its zenith at the turn of the nineteenth century when Matcham built the Opera House in 1903.

It is the highest borough in England standing one thousand feet above sea level with a collection of buildings all constructed before the first world war and tied together by a street pattern which always brings one to the forecourt of the Opera House and that 'green lung' and river which sweeps in, without any apparent interruption, from the surrounding Derbyshire hills.

My first impression on visiting Buxton in July 1977 is still very vivid – a marvellous Opera House, amongst some quite extraordinary buildings in a town which had missed all the horrific development of the last twenty years that has torn the heart out of some of our most lovely towns and cities.

The Opera House is the last building of a remarkable group linked by a conservatory designed by Edward Milner and Sir Joseph Paxton and overlooks the 'green lung' which terminates in the Pavilion Gardens. The other buildings in this group are a Playhouse, the shell of which dates from 1892, the Pavilion itself designed by Edward Milner in 1871 and a steel framed octagonal Concert Hall designed by Robert Rippon Duke in 1876.

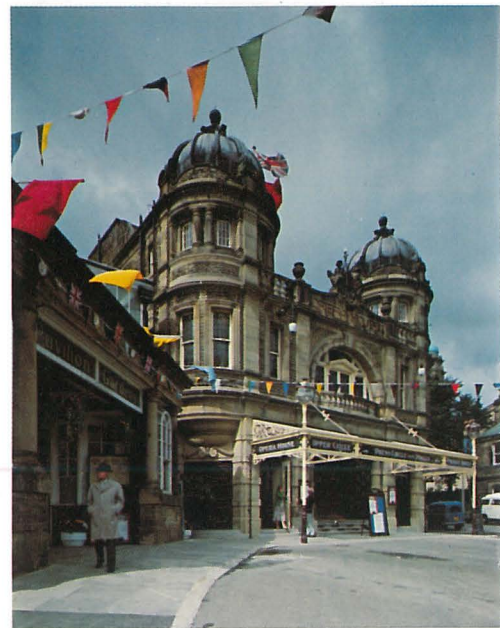
When Matcham's Opera House opened in June 1903 there was accommodation for twelve hundred people: eighty in the stalls,

five hundred in the pit, one hundred and forty in the dress circle, two hundred in the upper circle and two hundred and fifty in the gallery, plus some thirty standing in the upper circle. The price of a seat in the gallery was 6d.

Matcham's design has remained virtually intact, apart from the introduction of a projection box for the cinema. The seating however has been replaced over the years. Gone too is the class structure of Matcham's seating design. Originally there had been individual seats only in the four rows of the orchestra stalls and the dress circle, the rest of the house being in traditional benches. Slowly this caste system had been eroded and the benches replaced with individual seats, except in the gallery. In the upper circle, a raised timber floor had been introduced above the concrete risers giving a greater width between seat rows but requiring a handrail above the rest. As well as being badly designed and detailed, this handrail seriously impaired the sight lines from the upper circle.

In addition to a few but damaging deviations from Matcham's design, the Opera House had been badly neglected for decades. Fortunately, the house had been well constructed in masonry, concrete and structural steelwork, and apart from some isolated cracking of the gallery floor slabs due to the increased load from the projection room, the structure of the building itself was in good condition.

In the Autumn of 1977 Arup Associates were asked to prepare a report on its restoration and opening in time for the 1979 Summer Festival.



The brief can be summarised as 'The provision of an orchestra pit as large as the geometry and acoustic of the auditorium would allow, and the restoration of the Opera House as near as possible to Matcham's original design'.

The main constructional work was confined to the orchestra pit. After the first detailed surveys of this area, it was decided to design a steel frame which could be inserted without interfering with the existing stage structure. A system of steel cantilevered beams was designed such that the beams could be placed beneath the existing timber beams. The new orchestra-rail was moved approximately three feet into the auditorium giving a twelve feet extension of the orchestra pit beyond the edge of the stage. This gave an orchestra pit of some eight hundred square feet and provided room for eighty players. The programme and budget did not allow for an orchestra pit lift which would have been ideal, preferably in two sections, to allow different configurations of a forestage for theatrical work. The area behind the new orchestra pit wall was planned for a future band-room, lavatories and instrument store.



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