

Monday May 12th

Well Dressing

Christine Gould

Blackened banana skins might not seem an obvious choice when selecting which natural materials to use in the ancient art of Well Dressing – but they are among the more unusual items regularly included in designs by Buxton's own 'petal pushers'.

Coffee beans, peppercorns and melon seeds are also popular, but Christine Gould, Leader of Buxton Well Dressing Team, told members of Buxton and District u3a that sunflower seeds are a definite no-no after an enlightening experience in 2024.

"Buxton Community School pupils included lots of them in their design 'Saving Lives at Sea', but the pigeons soon found them and pecked away at it, degrading it completely," she explained. "That was a lesson well learned, and we'll never do it again!"

Christine has championed Buxton Well Dressing since 1986, when she, her late mum Anne and father Ken first became involved. She explained that the tradition of giving thanks for fresh water is thought to have originated in pagan times, was embraced by the Romans and was later adopted by Christianity.

Peculiar to the Peak District and Derbyshire, most notably the White Peak, the first documented evidence of Well Dressing was in Tissington in the 14th century, when villagers dressed their wells to give thanks for their fresh water supply in the wake of the Black Death epidemic. Scores of towns and villages in the area now stage their own Well Dressing festivals, and versions of the tradition have even spread to Gloucestershire and now Italy! According to the Derbyshire Well Dressing website, welldressing.com, this year a team from Holymoorside, near Chesterfield, will travel to Pietra Ligure in May to put together a traditional Derbyshire-style Well Dressing for the town's flower festival.

The first Well Dressing in Buxton was erected in 1840 at the Market Place Well, created by the Duke of Devonshire in 1814 to provide the town with a fresh water supply fed by gravity from Cold Springs Farm on Long Hill. St. Ann's Well was first dressed in 1863, and the first Blessing of the Wells was held in 1909. The first major contributor was local artist, furniture maker, taxidermist and businessman Robert Brunt, who joined in the 19th century at the age of 18, and was involved for more than 50 years.

In 1925 the tradition was taken over by Buxton Town Council to develop it as a tourist attraction, and tenders were put out to other groups in places such as Tissington, Wirksworth and Youlgreave to keep it alive. After the Second World War, it was taken over for a while by the Higon brothers of Tissington, followed by John and Wendy Swain, who co-ordinated it from 1957 to 1985. In 1986 the Swains retired, High Peak Borough Council withdrew its support and David Sanders of Hope stepped in to mastermind a change of approach and style.

Christine and her parents were among the initial volunteers who stepped up to keep Well Dressing alive in the town, and recalled that she and her mum were basically

given a tin plate full of petals and asked to get on with it. “None of us were very skilful at first, and we ended up running out of time so had to use whole flower heads in places,” she recalled. “But we were determined to learn, and we spent many evenings with other groups in the area, looking at their techniques and materials and learning as much as we could – and we have definitely improved over the years!”

Wooden boards made by local authority apprentices after the Second World War lasted until 1999, and in 2000 Buxton Well Dressing Team invested in new ones thanks to a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The boards are fitted with nails to stop the designs sliding off when they are erected, then covered with an inch of moist clay. Originally the Buxton team used to ‘puddle’ their own local clay by treading it in a bathful of water with their feet, but these days it is bought ready-made from Stoke-on-Trent, and around a tonne is used each year.

Designs are drawn on to small sheets of paper, are agreed upon and then are scaled up to full size on large sheets of paper. These are applied to the boards, and the outlines of each design are carefully cut with a craft knife. Finally the materials – including flowers, leaves, stems, seeds, cones, moss, straw, flourspar, limestone and even sheep’s wool - are applied. Volunteers use nail files to attach the materials, and overlap petals so that any rain runs off them. Favourite flowers include hydrangea and gerbera, because of their longevity.

Finally, the boards are carefully transported to, and erected at, four sites in Buxton – the Market Place Well, St Ann’s Well, Taylor Well on Spring Gardens and the Pump Room. Christine has a ‘first aid kit’ at all times to rectify any collateral damage caused in transit by stray thumbs! The whole process involves 50 volunteers over four days, and the designs stay in place throughout Carnival Week each July. The bulk of the preparation work takes place in the cool interior of St. John’s Church, where visitors are welcome and are encouraged to have a go themselves.

Other interesting facts and statistics shared by Christine

- It costs £2,500 to dress the wells each year, £1,000 of which is spent on flowers
- The full budget for Buxton Wells Dressing Festival week, including the Carnival, is £18,000, with £3,600 spent on enhanced first aid services following tighter legislation after the Manchester Arena bombing
- It takes 1300 ‘person hours’ each year to see the Well Dressing process through from start to finish
- If the Market Place Well were dressed only using hydrangea, it would take 64,000 petals to cover the boards
- When the boards are taken down, they are stored indoors until January, when the clay and remaining materials are removed ready to support new designs the following year

“So why do we do it?” was Christine’s rhetorical question in conclusion. “We do it because we want to preserve an ancient tradition, it brings our community together, it gives us a great sense of achievement and it is a challenge we simply cannot resist.”

This year the Buxton Well Dressing Team will be based in St. John Church as usual, from Monday June 30th to Thursday July 3rd, when visitors will be invited to see them in action, free of charge, between 9am and 5pm. New volunteers are always welcome – anyone interested can contact Christine at gouldchristine1@sky.com. Buxton Wells Dressing Festival 2025 will run from Friday July 4th to Sunday July 13th: www.buxtonwelldressing.co.uk.