

*petals
and
paganism*

IN THE
PEAK DISTRICT

VICKY SMITH DISCOVERS
AN EVER-EVOLVING
TRADITION IN AND
AROUND BRITAIN'S
OLDEST NATIONAL PARK.



uring spring and summer you might see something extraordinary in and around the Peak District: huge pictures 'painted' in flowers, placed by wells and water features. Across this varied landscape of limpid reservoirs

and verdant valleys, plunging ravines and wild moorlands, over 80 towns and villages practise a custom known as well dressing.

dressings themselves. According to *The Art of Buxton Well Dressing*, a book published by Buxton Well Dressing Festival in 2022, these used to be simple garlands but later became the elaborate petalled scenes of today. Volunteers can spend an astonishing 500 hours making them in the week before their unveiling; seeing some underway in Bollington, a Cheshire town near the Peak District border, I can understand why.

Each creation begins with a large wooden frame packed with fresh clay, onto which the design is traced. 'Some do things differently but we add the less perishable things next,' joint volunteer leader Janet Beech tells me,

“It’s a meticulous, painstaking process done entirely by volunteers.”

The tradition of decorating wells to give thanks for fresh water is centuries old. Possibly rooted in pagan ritual, it’s now synonymous with Tissington, a village in the Derbyshire Dales; many say it was here that villagers first dressed their well in 1348, crediting its 'pure' water for their escape from the Black Death, while others suggest it took place in 1615, when the same source saved residents from a drought. Either way, it’s likely this scenic settlement played a key role in the tradition.

These days, well dressing is still prevalent in Derbyshire – especially around the limestone plateau of White Peak, famed for its abundant springs – but has spread to other Peak District counties and even beyond. Events, which take place from May to September, range from 'in-the-making' sessions to blessings and carnivals.

The main attraction, of course, is the

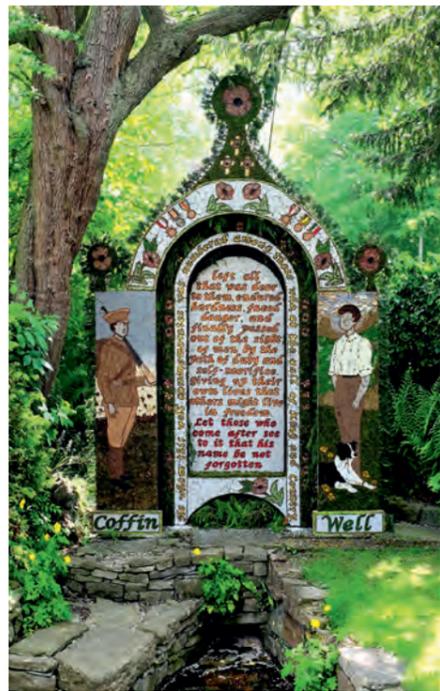
gesturing to a table lined with materials: bark, coffee beans, sweetcorn, dried chamomile, alder cones, pine needles, peppercorns, feathers, shells, sorrel seeds, sycamore keys and others besides. As Bollington’s 2022 theme is the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee, one lady is even using fur to decorate a corgi. 'The dog went to the groomer’s yesterday,' Janet chuckles, adding that 'more conservative' places such as Tissington and Eyam would say fur was cheating. 'They have strict rules on which natural materials are allowed. We’re the well-dressing rebels!'

Finally, the petals are added. These are often from commercially grown flowers like hydrangeas, both for environmental reasons (likewise, with the use of readily available leaves like copper beech) and longevity. Each must be individually positioned, overlapping

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Well dressing at Tissington in Derbyshire.

THIS PAGE:
The view from Curbar Edge in Derbyshire.





like roof tiles to allow rain to slide off. It's a meticulous, painstaking process done entirely by volunteers and, considering the artworks last only a few days, I had questioned the motivation. Yet seeing the sense of camaraderie in Bollington, and the pride at the spectacular results, I realise the importance. It's about unity, friendship and preserving a unique ancient heritage – and apparently is therapeutic too. My only hope is that more young people are inspired to get involved as, while it's common for local schools to create a board, volunteers are generally retired.

My next event is a blessing, a practice that began as well dressing became Christianised; it's taking place in Hayfield, a picturesque stone village that foots Kinder Scout plateau, home to the highest point in both Derbyshire and the Peak District. I walk to the ceremony starting point – an enchanting autumnal display on one of the main streets – as church bells chime in anticipation and the brass band, dapper in carnation-red suits, play hymns. Two May Queens pose by the decoration – Hayfield is thought to have the longest unbroken May Queen tradition in the UK and Commonwealth, though these days the girls attend events year-round and not just on their namesake month.

Surprisingly, the vicar here is originally from Atlanta, Georgia. He arrives late and puffed out but soon wins over the attendees, religious or otherwise, with his affable manner and evident admiration for the beautiful displays: designed, as in many places, by volunteer local artists before being traced and filled in by the dressers.



LEFT: Well dressing in Tissington that commemorates the youth of the village who died for their country.

THIS PAGE FROM THE TOP: A Platinum Jubilee dressing in Buxton; A volunteer works on a Jubilee-themed well dressing in Buxton.

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Hayfield's theme this year is the seasons and the eight dressings, sponsored by regional businesses, range from squirrels and stags to winter walks and summer ice creams. As we, a chattering procession of young and old, follow the vicar to each display, he makes a short speech; community spirit is a recurring topic and he often alludes to Hayfield events, including the famous 1932 Kinder Scout trespass that revolutionised walkers' rights, before rounding off with a blessing.

The final stop is St John's Church, whose flower festival sees homemade cakes and its own resplendent floral displays. 'May the wells of blessings continue to flow within our community,' the vicar says, and I'm struck again by that last word. I'm not religious but it doesn't matter, for this is what it's all about: bringing people together, as indeed wells have done for millennia.

Blessings aren't the only Christian element to well dressing; the designs themselves were once usually biblical too. However, according to Christine Gould, a secretary at Buxton Well Dressing Festival, the displays 'have changed with the times and are now often secular. We're living in a much more multicultural society, so we pick subjects like anniversaries. Our themes for 2022 include the Platinum Jubilee and 100 years since the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb. Politics can also feature, like our children's board supporting Ukraine.'

Buxton's festival was founded in 1840 when the Duke of Devonshire arranged for a piped water supply to the marketplace. It's now one of the area's biggest events of its kind, aptly so considering Buxton's heritage. Poised on the edge of the Peak District, England's highest market town has been renowned since pre-Roman times for its thermal springs, which were once believed to have healing powers and enticed everyone from pilgrims to Mary, Queen of Scots. It later became a fashionable spa resort and today abounds with landmarks like the Georgian Crescent (now a five-star spa hotel) and St Anne's Well, source of the town's famous bottled water.

Nowadays, Buxton Well Dressing Festival also sees a carnival and funfair: complete, as I find out on the sunny parade weekend, with rides galore and even Elvis-themed floats among other more 'conventional' exhibits. I'm momentarily worried these are a distraction, not in keeping with such a long-standing custom – but then, surrounded by laughter and that same sense of camaraderie I felt in Bollington and Hayfield, I dismiss this idea.

From petals to 'rebellious' dog fur, vicars' blessings to secular designs and modern-day amusements, it's clear that well dressing continues to adapt while preserving ancient traditions. For this very reason, I've little doubt it will unite and delight for centuries to come.

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

Buxton offers easy access to many partaking towns and villages, plus its own popular well-dressing festival and many more attractions besides. An ideal Peak District base, it can be reached by train – try Trainline's SplitSave feature or railcards for competitive fares.

BEST TIME TO GO

Well dressings take place from May to September, with the majority in June and July.

CURRENCY British pound

TIME ZONE GMT

FOOD

You'll find everything from top-notch restaurants to hearty pub grub, but don't miss staples like Buxton pudding: a crumbly, buttery confection filled with raspberry preserve.

WHERE TO STAY

Buxton Crescent: recently reopened as a five-star spa hotel, following a £70 million renovation, it offers top-notch pampering in a Grade I-listed Georgian landmark.

HOW TO DO IT

Websites such as welldressing.com and visitpeakdistrict.com offer ample information.

MUST-PACK ITEM

An emergency raincoat. Even in summer, you never know here..

WHY GO

To see a fascinating custom in some captivating places, not least the Peak District. Mostly located within Derbyshire – but with footholds in Yorkshire, Cheshire, Greater Manchester and Staffordshire – Britain's oldest national park offers much to discover.

Vicky Smith travelled with the assistance of Trainline (thetrainline.com).