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**Newsletter No. 54  
Summer 2010**

**FRIENDS OF OAKWELL HALL  
& COUNTRY PARK**



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Photo - T Hartley  
The staircase leading down to  
the dog gate

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# OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY

by Anne Brown

Earlier this year I was very fortunate to attend the Passion Play at Oberammergau. This has been an ambition of mine for many years and as the play is only performed every ten years, it was something I had looked forward to for a very long time.

The story goes back to the 1630s when the bubonic plague was sweeping across Europe. The residents of Oberammergau believed they were safe until an infected traveller passed through the village. The adult death rate rose from one in October 1632 to 20 in the month of March 1633. The residents of the village vowed that if they were spared lasting effects from the plague, they would produce a play depicting the life and death of Jesus, every ten years thereafter for all time. By July 1633 the death rate had subsided to one and the villages kept their part of the vow and performed the first play in 1634.

After 1674 it was decided to change the date to 1680 and since then the play has been performed during the year that ends with a zero. There have only been two exceptions: in 1770 all passion plays were banned by order of the Ecclesiastical Council of the Elector, at the behest of the Roman Catholic Church and in 1940 when World War II forced the cancellation. In addition to the regular ten year performances there were also plays in 1922, in 1934 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the

original vow and in 1984 to celebrate the 350th anniversary of the very first play.

Over 2000 performers, musicians and stage technicians are involved - all of whom have been resident in the village for at least 20 years and with the exception of those playing Roman Soldiers, the men cannot shave or cut their hair from Ash Wednesday the year before!

Admission fees were first charged in 1790 and today visitors travel from all over the world, usually as part of a package holiday. Visitor numbers range from 420,000 to 530,000. The season this year involves 102 performances and runs until the first Sunday in October.

The play is absolutely astonishing - the two sessions last approximately two and a half hours each (though it was three hours in our case), with a lengthy break in between - yet the players are not trained actors - just village residents.

The scenes on the cross are incredibly moving - as, indeed, is the whole play.

Truly an unforgettable experience.



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# Tanner rush

by Roger Knights

There's a confession I must make - although I've lived in Birstall for most of my life, I'm not actually from there. In fact I'm an Armla square'aerd (translation - an Armley Squarehead). Armley - you know - that part of Leeds famous for its castle - the Gaol.

Now Armley did and still does, have a number of other attractions besides this famous landmark but the ones I remember most as a little lad, were the cinemas.

We had five - The Lyric and The Crown both on Tong Road, The Western on Branch Road, The Palace on Armley Road and finally the Picturedrome on Carcroft. What a selection.

Out of the five the favourites for our gang were The Lyric and The Palace because Mums and Dads allowed us to go there and it didn't cost too much either. Tuesday night was picture night but the best part of the week had to be the Saturday afternoon 'tanner rush' at The Palace. For six old pennies (a large part of your spending money!) we were transported away into the magical world of make believe. There was usually a cartoon - Mighty Mouse (remember him?) - then a serial and a western to finish - not bad value for a tanner.

Our adventure would start around 12.30 pm when, neatly scrubbed and approved by Mum, we would meet at the end of the street. On the way across the local playing fields with its cinder covered football pitches and tethered horses we'd be thinking ahead to what would happen that afternoon to Flash Gordon or Superman and hoping they would overcome the evil doers. On reaching the main road we joined the throng headed for The Palace.

Now here's a strange thing - we always formed an orderly queue round the cinema - meeting up with other friends - and strangely the girls never mingled with the boys! As the time neared 2 pm, the manager would survey the massed ranks. Woe betide anyone who had transgressed the week before - using a sergeant major's voice the manager would have them quaking in their shoes. Of course no one was denied admittance and after handing over our tanner we ventured into the darkened auditorium where we were confronted by the fearsome sight of ADOLF - the commissioner - who, in his splendid uniform was intent on keeping law and order at any cost. Why Adolf? Well we knew he had been a baddy who wore a uniform in the war..... it seemed natural to us to call him that.



The Palace was a roomy place and a little unusual in that it didn't have a balcony - just two sets of raised rows on either side which for some unknown reason were called 'Boats'. No one - absolutely no one - was permitted to sit in these during the afternoon - hence Adolf's presence. But what a challenge! Brave souls would try to creep into the Boats when Adolf was distracted but what a sixth sense he had. Capture would lead at worst to expulsion or punishment by being placed on the front row.

A great cheer sounded when the lights eventually dimmed which signalled the beginning of the ice storm. The ice storm? Well, I failed to mention that the majority of us would buy a penny ice lolly - and what lollipops they were. When you had sucked out all the coloured flavour, there'd be just ice left on the stick.....if you timed this carefully it coincided with the dimming of the lights. You can guess what happened next - up into the air they'd go to rain down on those behind. Amid the squeals and laughter the show went on.

Buster Crabbe as Flash Gordon would begin his battles against Ming the Merciless, the Claymen and other strange creatures as he strove to save Dale, his girlfriend, the scientists and, of course, the planet. Flash would be helped by Prince Barrin, who looked a little like an aged Errol Flynn but he was an expert swordsman, so Flash was never in any real danger, was he?

All the episodes ended with poor Flash in some dire predicament, which guaranteed our return the following week to make sure he hadn't come to a nasty end.

So, to the main feature. This would usually be a western in which Hopalong Cassidy (not John Wayne then!) or Roy Rogers would be the star. You know, these cowboys were really good - they never got dirty, they rolled about on the ground but their clothes stayed immaculate and they were absolutely crack shots. The plot usually involved a fiendish band of Mexicans (why always Mexicans?) who'd be draped in enough ammunition to fight a world war, had huge brimmed hats, big drooping moustaches and uttered 'Si Señor' to everything. Dressed in black they would always outnumber the goodies by about 200 to one but this never seemed to bother our heroes who, after charging across thousands of miles of desert and expending an enormous amount of ammunition, always came out as winners - of course.



Roy Rogers & Trigger

Just to whet our appetites and to guarantee our return the following week, a carefully edited trailer would allow a glimpse of Flash Gordon in a dire situation or the very same Mexican gang stealing cattle from other ranches. And so would end our perfect Saturday afternoon.

All that now remained was for us to wend our way home, pursuing bandits or flying our spaceships and saving earth.

Happy days indeed.



Hopalong Cassidy & Topper

# New pastures (and gardens) for Richard

by Eric Brown  
Senior Museum Officer



June saw a major change in the staffing and management of the park here at Oakwell Hall with the departure of our Countryside Officer, Richard Aspinall. He has taken up the position of Heritage Development Manager at Cannon Hall, near Barnsley.

Although we were delighted for Richard as this is a great career move and a wonderful opportunity to make his mark on a garden and park that have so much potential for development, it's a great loss for us. Over the space of 8 years, Richard has led a wonderful and talented team of rangers, who together have taken this park to standards never reached before.

New signage at the park entrances and around the park; improved paths - and so much of the site is now accessible to people with disabilities; new play areas for young and older children; redeveloped formal gardens that attracted royal visitors; sculptures; a magnificent new wetland and viewing area and six successive Green Flag Awards for excellence in green space management says it all!

I know it was a hard decision for Richard to leave Oakwell. He has been involved with the park for 16 years, starting as a fresh faced volunteer in 1994 - he had the most impressive mane of red hair I have ever seen! (The photos are kept well and truly locked away in a hidden vault). He subsequently obtained the position of Ranger, and then ultimately Countryside Officer for the park. Incredibly, he has spent nearly half his life here and when you give as much love and devotion to the park and gardens as Richard has over the years, it's no wonder moving to pastures new needed very deep thought.

So we wish him well. We'll miss him - for his love of the park, his sense of humour his creativity and enthusiasm, his incredible knowledge of natural history and his regular entries in the accident book for harm he caused himself in the line of duty. If there was ever a hazard in the park or offices - Richard always found it.

Thank you for everything Richard - I have a feeling Cannon Hall could be on its way to its first Green Flag.....



Richard at work in the park



# and thanks from the Friends too

"You guys sell yourselves short". The number of times the Friends heard Richard utter this phrase must be in the hundreds. He always thought the Friends were a good team - he backed the group to the hilt and it's going to be strange not to see his familiar face at Oakwell - he was almost part of the fixtures and fittings! If ever a ranger at Oakwell truly appreciated the work of the Friends, it has to be Richard.

There's no doubt that we shall miss his happy smiley face and his witty comments, his brilliant and innovative ideas and his enthusiasm for anything connected to Oakwell. Fortunately for us, he leaves behind an equally enthusiastic and appreciative ranger team so the work of the Friends both inside the Hall and outside in the park is 'business as usual'.

After such a long association, the Friends were delighted to be able to present Richard with something he had always wanted - a Giant Redwood tree (thanks due to Beatrice here for her sterling efforts in tracing one for sale). Richard decided that the tree should be planted at Oakwell and will return regularly to monitor it's progress.



But did this guy really do any work ???



## GOOD LUCK RICHARD



# A SPECIAL PLACE

the development of a Faith Garden at Oakwell Hall Country Park

On the 29 June the Mayor of Kirklees, Councillor Andrew Palfreeman, officially launched our new Faith Garden here at Oakwell Hall.

Its main role will be an outdoor classroom that, together with a trail around the gardens starting and finishing there, will form the venue for a programme of outdoor educational visits to explore the common themes of faith and understanding between the diverse communities of Kirklees.

Each of these will take place here at Oakwell in the morning. In the afternoon the class will visit a Kirklees faith centre - which could be a mosque, church or Sikh temple, with the children then learning in more detail how faith is expressed within that particular religion. We have already piloted this visit with 2 primary schools, St. Mary's from Gomersal and Overthorpe Juniors from Dewsbury. Both visits to Oakwell went really well, as did the afternoon visits to a mosque and temple respectively.

The education packages associated with the visits to Oakwell were written and delivered by Interfaith Kirklees (Schools) who have been key partners in the development of this project.

The idea for the garden originated in autumn 2007, when the Oakwell Hall Visitor Centre hosted a touring exhibition from the British Library called Sacred on Location, the focus of which was a Mongolian style yurt in the Barn!

The exhibition was based around the theme of the world's major faiths and was open to park visitors and school groups. Two public event days with associated craft activities and music were held on 4 and 18 November.

A package for schools was produced for these visits that looked at aspects of world religion and offered children the opportunity to explore their own faith and values. The children produced decorative hangings showcasing things that were important in their lives.

The exhibition was visited and enjoyed by faith leaders from within Kirklees and ideas began to form around using Oakwell Hall Country Park in the longer term which, because of its natural beauty and neutrality, could lead to a permanent output from this temporary exhibition – a faith garden.

With help of LOCA (Kirklees Council's arts and regeneration agency) and the artist Antonia Stowe, we undertook some consultation with visitors to the park and targeted groups of young people. Eventually this led to a design for the garden based on the theme of circles, the main feature circle being located within a mound of earth surrounding a traditional drystone wall with seating, big enough for a whole class to sit. Two adjacent circles would comprise a low mound and stone circle respectively. The circles would be sympathetic to the surrounding natural and built environment, accessible and, crucially, not displaying any overt religious symbols which may alienate particular groups or cultures.

Thanks to funding from the Birstall and Birkenshaw Area and a grant from SACRE, we were able to turn these ideas into reality. The superb drystone walling in the main circle was carried out by Andy Cauldwell, with most of the remaining work carried out by the ranger team and with the help of our fantastic volunteers who continue give us so much support.

Now with the garden launched, the next stage is to promote the garden, trail and associated education package to schools in Kirklees, as well as faith groups around the area, and see the garden grow and develop over future years.

As any gardener will tell you – a garden is never finished!



Inset - the stone circle with the low mound in the background

# The Lady - The Well and the Wolves

by Alan Hodgson

*"On the left of the road coming from Leeds lie the remains of Howley Hall, now the property of Lord Cardigan, but formerly belonging to a branch of the Saviles. Near to it is Lady Anne's Well; 'Lady Anne,' according to tradition, having been worried and eaten by wolves as she sat at the well, to which the indigo-dyed factory people from Birstall and Batley woollen mills yet repair on Palm Sunday, when the water possesses a remarkable medicinal efficacy; and it is still believed that they assume a strange variety of colours at six o'clock in the morning on that day."*



The above intriguing excerpt is from Elizabeth Gaskell's *'Life of Charlotte Bronte'* first published in 1857. Just who was this Lady Anne that apparently came to such a gruesome end and when exactly did it happen? Furthermore, if it was associated with such a terrible event, why was this particular well perceived to have such miraculous healing powers that people would make an annual pilgrimage to it from miles around? Is Mrs Gaskell simply quoting old folk-tales, or is there anything to substantiate the tradition she mentions? To try and answer these questions we must consider each aspect separately.

Firstly then, what is the historical likelihood of wolves having really attacked and killed a local person? Contrary to popular belief, even though the wolf has been for centuries the commonest and largest wild predator in Europe, verified attacks on humans are actually rare. Indeed, according to modern research, wolves are surprisingly tolerant of humans and usually seek to avoid contact although it is true they may still be driven to attack by factors such as provocation, starvation or disease. Having said that, it is sobering to consider that certain modern dogs injure and kill more people per year (not to mention sheep, poultry etc) than the legendary

'big bad wolf' ever did, despite its wicked reputation!

However, assuming a local person was actually killed by wolves, when might this have happened? Although wolves were still numerous in Yorkshire during Anglo-Saxon times they were gradually hunted down or driven away from human settlements as the wildwood was cleared for grazing and agriculture. Long declared as vermin they could be killed by anyone and during the 13th and 14th centuries appear to have been finally eradicated from northern England. The last wolves had probably disappeared from the Birstall and Batley areas by the early medieval period and, therefore, any wolf attack must have been well before this time. It remains possible that someone was later mauled to death but by then the killers are more likely to have been perhaps a pack of wild dogs.

Secondly, we must consider who the unfortunate 'Lady Ann' may have been. Her title leads us to assume she was not some ordinary villager but perhaps a member of the local nobility. After the Norman Conquest the lands around Batley became the property of Ilbert de Lacy, but by the 13th century we find the de Soothill family in situ. A bond document dated 1242 mentions John 'de Sothil' and his wife 'Lady A', so could this be the mysterious Anne? Unfortunately, whilst various surviving records confirm the family

were very active in securing land and property (in 1344 Sir Henry de Soothill successfully disputed the ownership of 34 acres with Nostell Priory), there is no mention whatever of such a tragic and unusual family death.

So is there any other locally connected 'Lady Anne' who might have left her name to posterity? Fast forward 300 years to the Civil War period and indeed there is! To set the scene, back in 1590 Sir John Savile, whose family had long since obtained the old Thornhill Estates through marriage, completed the building of Howley Hall. During that period of strife the staunchly Royalist Saviles were to hold it for the King until it was stormed and plundered by Parliament forces in the summer of 1643. Sir William Savile, great grandson of Sir John, had actually been with King Charles when he first raised his standard at Nottingham two years earlier and when he died early in 1644 his pregnant widow, Lady Anne, took over her late husband's duties as Governor of Sheffield. What happened next is described by Dr P Barwick who, in the life of his brother, the Dean of St. Paul's, later wrote:

*"This gallant lady, famous even for her warlike actions beyond her sex, had been besieged by the rebels in Sheffield Castle, which they battered on all sides by great guns, tho' she was big with child, and had so little regard for her sex, that in that condition they refused a midwife she had sent for, the liberty of going to her. Yet this unheard-of barbarity was so far from moving her that she resolved to perish rather than surrender the castle. But the walls being every where full of cracks with age, and ready to fall, the soldiers of the garrison began to mutiny, not so much concerned for their own danger, as for the lamentable condition of this noble lady, so near the time of her falling in labour; for she was brought to bed the night after the castle was surrendered."*

The action had started on 27 July 1644 and the Castle was surrendered on 11 August, at which point the redoubtable Lady Anne was finally allowed safe conduct to leave with her five children. A day later she then gave birth to her fourth son.

Although the King was himself to surrender in May 1646, his supporters nevertheless carried on the fight for some time. Two years later the Royalists seized Pontefract Castle, with Lady Anne duly sending a detachment to fortify her family's property at nearby Thornhill Hall. Parliamentarian General Sir Thomas Fairfax quickly pursued them and placed the Hall under siege but whilst the Pontefract garrison would hold out for several more months, the house at Thornhill was far less defensible. It was on the point of surrender when its powder magazine was detonated at 6pm on 19 May 1648, destroying much of the building. Lady Anne, with her remaining family, subsequently moved to another Savile property at Rufford Abbey in Nottinghamshire, eventually dying there in 1662. However, with her martial reputation intact and with her strong connections to the local area, it is easy to see how her name and



ST ANNE'S WELL, BUXTON, DECORATED.

bravery would be remembered and passed into legend hereabouts.

Lastly, we must look at the well itself. In common with numerous other wells scattered across the British Isles it would appear that Lady Anne's Well may have been propitiated by local people for centuries. Superstitions abound, for in distant times wells were often thought to have healing powers, and people would visit them on special days, even bottling the waters to take home. Perhaps some readers will have attended the famous well-dressing ceremonies that remain to this day, particularly in Derbyshire? The Victorian engraving (pictured) shows the decorated St Anne's Well at Buxton, and gives an idea how Lady Anne's Well may also have looked 150 years ago when local people flocked there.

To sum up then, the legend of 'Lady Anne' being attacked and eaten by wolves whilst visiting a well just south of Howley Hall is probably a combination of several local myths and stories. Like many others in Britain, the well could have originally been dedicated to St Anne but later renamed as 'Lady Anne's' due to the local Civil War heroine. After this, an early urban myth involving wolves perhaps evolved to explain why the 'Lady' and not the Saint was now commemorated there. It is worth noting though that other local wells were never to attract such stories. Besides Oakwell, Birstall boasted Jacob's Well and Green Well at Mount Top, Coach Well near the Smithies crossroads and Church Well at the foot of Garfitt Hill. Batley could also claim Billy Well, Spaw Well and Knottingley Well, whilst nearby Chidswell had the Occle Well whose waters were also believed to be medicinal.

Only Lady Anne's Well involves wolves but, whatever the truth, it makes for a good tale and it is a shame that it is nowadays largely forgotten!

## Di Priestley's In the *Slow Lane*



It was 30 years since we had visited tiny St Gregory's Minster at Kirkdale near Kirbymoorside but what's that when a church has been there since Saxon times? It often feels as though our history began in 1066 when William the Conqueror obliterated Saxon England forcing a Norman-French elite upon a subject people.

A tiny church, in a peaceful place by a stream, stood perhaps as early as the 7th century, dedicated to the great Pope Gregory who sent the missionaries under St Augustine to convert England. At some time it fell into ruin but was repaired around 1000 years later by Orm, son of Gamal. This man made a sundial which still survives, partly because for centuries it was plastered over and because for the past 200 years it has been sheltered by a porch.

He wrote a message on the slab to commemorate this work. Could Orm actually read himself? Could the worshippers of his day understand what the letters meant? Perhaps more Saxons were literate than we realise. He recorded the name of his King, Edward the Confessor (1005 - 1066) and that of the local Earl, Tosti the brother of King Harold.



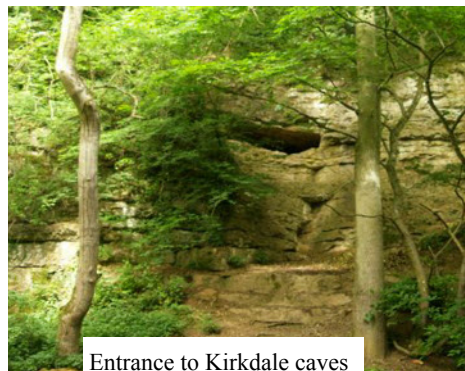
At the west end of the church a wonderfully tall, narrow Saxon arch remains which was probably the original entrance. Two intricately carved tombstones of the 7th and 8th centuries are now inside the church, safe from weathering, as are several pieces of cross shafts and part of a stone showing a bow - maybe from the grave of an archer.

Life was tough in the 11th century. In 1066 Tosti was killed at the Battle of Stamford Bridge fighting with a Viking army against his brother Harold. That was 25th September. On 14th October Harold was also killed at Hastings after marching all the way south to fight Duke William. The ruthless conquest and harrying of the north followed.

Yet God has been praised here for countless centuries. The guidebook tells us that services are held there every week and that there is an enthusiastic choir.

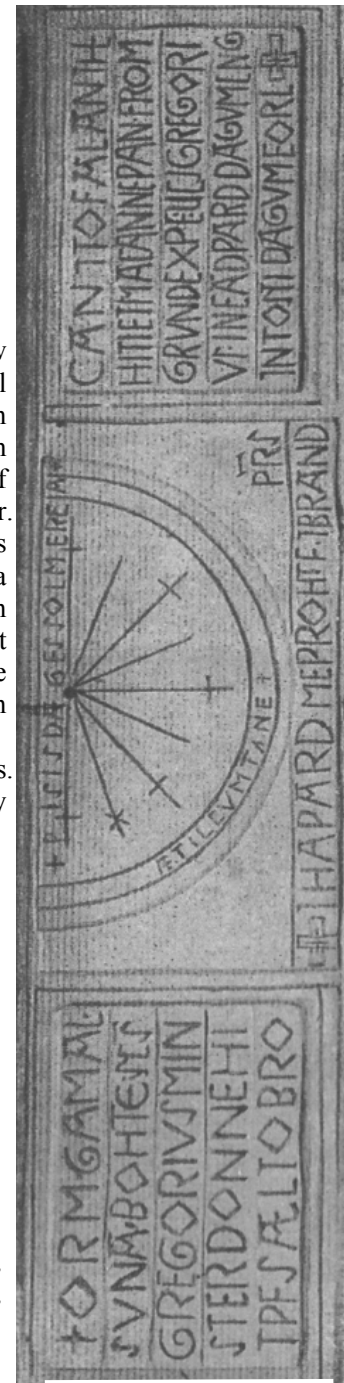
Long may it continue!

If you're looking for a full day out and the weather is pleasant there are several walks around St Gregory's which take in many local points of interest. The most popular is Kirkdale caves. These are quite close to St Gregory's and were discovered by quarrymen in 1821.



Entrance to Kirkdale caves

The remains of ancient wild animals from 100,000 years ago were found inside, including bison, bear, giant deer, wolves, lion, hippopotamus, rhinoceros and mammoth.



The sundial at St Gregorv's