

The Peak District: The Eyam plague and Well-Dressing



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Title page: Discarded well-dressing boards after the 25th to 31st May 2006 festival.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Pierre de Villiers was born in Durban, South Africa. He was trained to World Meteorological Organization class one meteorologist and multi-discipline weather forecaster in the South African Weather Service where he reached the rank of Director. He served on a weather ship in the South Atlantic. He served on World Meteorological Organization expert teams and was World Meteorological Organization rapporteur for the Africa region. He was also a commercial pilot and flying instructor. More recently he was a weather forecaster in the United Arab Emirates, then in England. Now retired.

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Introduction

On the 2nd June 2006 we did the Peak District Tour in Derbyshire in the East Midlands, as shown in the Eyewitness Travel Guides Great Britain, an excellent guide. The Peak District is about an hour and a half drive from Solihull. I really wanted to see the Crich Tramway Village Museum, which, believe it or not is in Crich. See the article "Photograph album of buses, trolley buses and trams", page 74, for more about the museum.



Crich street scene minus trams from the top of a tram.

In a nutshell, there are about 70 trams at the museum, a number from far afield, that has a recreated period village laid out in what was a quarry was a 1.5 kilometres tramline into open country. Well worth visiting.

So after about 2 hours at the museum, including a 20 minute return tram ride, we took in the rest of the tour.

Cromford and Matlock

From Crich our tour went north-westward to Cromford and Arkwright's Mill, the world's first water-powered cotton mill. It was crowded with tourists and tour busses. So we went on to Matlock, a very attractive town stretched out along the west bank of the Derwent River with a high cliff along the other side of the river. The traffic crawled at snail's pace. no place to stop for photographs. Once out of there we wound our way north through Bakewell to Eyam.

Eyam

Eyam's claim to fame is that the local tailor imported the 1665 to 1666 plague from London in 1665 on a piece of cloth then the villagers went into self-imposed quarantine to prevent it spreading. Apparently, 257 people out of a population of about 350 died.

There are doubts about their medical knowledge. I had been led to believe that the plague was spread by fleas biting humans after biting infected rats. Tailor, George Vickers who was the first to die. The demographic study of the sequence of dates of deaths and resident location by Professor Chris Duncan (1932-2005) and demographer Susan Scott, indicated that the infection was spread in the village in a pattern via contact with relatives, neighbours and friends. Furthermore, it was a form of Ebola virus, because the human symptoms and large bumps were are not entirely consistent with bubonic plague. So not rats. They argue that rats, with infected fleas infecting humans could not spread the plague as fast and widespread as occurred. Furthermore, fleas and rats are dormant or inactive during cold winter months. However, the Black Death, spread very quickly in cold and warm weather.

Once again, a rather tourist packed place. Not being able to find somewhere to park, we know nothing more about Eyam. Except that, in the churchyard, seen from the road as we searched for parking, there is a 7th century Saxon cross. The cross is carved with a mixture of pagan and Christian symbols. The town also has old fashioned tea shops and a stunning view of the valley if one leaves northward via the Causeway Road.

Heathersage and Edale



Heathersage.

Next stop was Heathersage, which borders on the moors to the north and which is "thought" to be Morton in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. Do not know who did the thoughting.

After this it was on to Edale, which is in the Peak District National Park where one winds through scenic valleys and over scenic passes. Very much a holiday resort area with people all over the place cycling and walking up and down hills while the sheep looked on.

Buxton

Off again past Buxton and southward until we came to the Arbor Low stone circle, known as the "Stonehenge of the North" according to the guide book. But all it is, is 46 stone slabs lying, since 2000 BC, in a rough circle around a ditch on a private farm, for which one must pay £1 each to marvel at. I think not. We thought not. We thought a better idea was tea and scones. So we left and had a much more pleasant experience when we came to Tissington, the mother place of Well-Dressing.

Tissington

Now the British do some strange things, like invent a game called cricket that can't be played in the rain in a country that rains all the time and Morris dancing. Even so, one does not think that they would also like to dress wells, but they do. Not only that, it is also virtually unheard-of outside Derbyshire. In fact, a lot of people in Derbyshire do not know about it.

Well-dressing can be defined as “the art of decorating wells, or springs, with natural objects to form pictures and designs as a thanksgiving for the gift of water, especially in times of drought.” So says Roy Christian (1987) in Well-Dressing in Derbyshire.

Its origin is a mystery. It probably dates back to pagan Celtic sacrifices to water gods as a thank you for water received and please, can we have more. The early Christian Church tended to absorb and adapt pagan customs rather than suppressing them. But, as early as 960 there was a decree forbidding the worship of fountains and as late as 1102, it was condemned by St. Anselm as a form of idolatry. However, it persisted and it still has a strong religious link.

The frames, or boards, for the pictures are soaked. “Puddling” or trampling of the clay is done to get the correct consistency. The clay has salt mixed in it that prevents cracking and preserves

the freshness of the flowers that are stuck on later. They then "lathe," or plaster, the frames with the clay. A paper pattern is then laid on the clay frame and the design is pricked through on to the frame using a pointer or toothed wheel. The paper is taken off and "black knobbing" of the outline takes place. At Tissington this is marked with cones from the alder tree or with coffee beans. The flower petals, seeds, etc., are then put in place. No artificial materials are used. The well-dressing takes the form of elaborate designs, using thousands of flower petals and depicting biblical or local themes. It is a skilful art. The results are attractive and impressive. One well dressed well can take about 400 hours of labour to create. As one can appreciate, it is quite a process and there are the technical names to remember, such as black knobbing and puddling.

Tissington Estate village prepares 6 wells for display on Ascension Day and for a week until the following Wednesday evening. The 6 wells are blessed by the clergy after the Ascension Day morning service at Tissington's St. Mary's Church of England. There is also a Presbyterian church tucked away around the back on the edge of the village, but the tourist boards do not mention this poor relation. The week-long show attracts about 50,000 visitors. The year of our first visit, the well-dressings were on display from the 25th May 2006 to the 31st, inclusive. So of course we missed it by two days. The next year, 2007, it was from the 17th May to the 23rd. We were there boots and all on the 19th.



The six wells dressed as seen on the 19th May 2007.



The well top right in the previous photograph in its normal state. Photographed in June 2006. On the right an example of a nearby house in local grey stone.



Tissington Hall Grade II* listed.

The Tissington Estate has been in the FitzHerbert family since the reign of the English Queen Elizabeth I. The family has lived in Tissington Hall since it was built in 1609 by Francis FitzHerbert. Tissington can be traced back to 1086, when it is mentioned in the Domesday Book as Tizinctun and it was among the possessions of Henry de Ferrers. He was the forebear of the Earls of Derbyshire and had more than 200 estates. One hundred of them in Derbyshire and the rest spread over 13 other counties. Even further back in time an Anglo-Saxon burial site was found at Tissington containing a metre long sword and below this were found

Celtic remains. An earthenware urn from the Bronze Age has also been found in the area.

The estate, consisting of 40 cottages, 13 farms and miscellaneous lettings, has remained virtually unchanged. For the visitor there is a butchery, candle shop, garden nursery and souvenir come craft shop, farm B&B's and The Old Coach House Tearoom. At the last of which we had very good strawberry jam and cream scones with tea.

From there it was southward and home on the A515, but not before taking ages to get through Ashbourne in their evening rush to get home.

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Welcome to Tissington notice board.

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