NEWS

Harrogate Heritage

Looking back on the first image of famous visitor to Harrogate

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For almost twenty years from 1995, the eminent local historian Malcolm Neesam contributed a series of remarkable articles to the Advertiser, initially under the headline 'Bygone Harrogate' and later using the title 'Our Heritage'. In association with Harrogate Civic Society, we are proud to republish a selection from the series. The views expressed were those of the late Mr Neesam at the time of writing and do not necessarily reflect the current view of the Advertiser or Harrogate Civic Society.

One of the wealthiest women in the country, Angela Burdett-Coutts was a frequent visitor to Harrogate. Malcolm Neesom charts her good works and reveals the first picture seen of her in the town...

Those of us with an interest in Harrogate's history are aware of several significant gaps in the photographic record of the town's past.

No photographs survive of the laying out or early building work on the Victoria estate, despite the fact that this was done during the heyday of amateur Victorian photography.

Such a major public event as the 1897 opening of the Royal Baths by the Duke of Cambridge must have seen several photographs taken, and similarly, the opening of the Royal Hall six years later, yet none have survived of either occasion.

But before we become too incredulous, we might wonder if there are any photographs of the laying out or construction of the Jenny Fields estate during the 1970s, or the opening of the Conference Centre in 1981.

How about the Victoria Centre in 1992, when the Mayor had to resort to using a chain-saw to open the recalcitrant doors?

How on earth did the press fail to capture that event on film?

For me, the rarest photographs of old Harrogate are those which show the interiors of such public buildings as the 1862 railway station, the Empire Theatre at the junction of Cheltenham Parade and Mount Street, the Town Hall Theatre (now the Mercer Art Gallery), the town's several cinemas, other than the Odeon, and Park Place, the regency mansion which until 1960 stood on the site now filled by Park Place apartments.

There are also gaps in the photographic record of famous visitors to the town, although this is understandable, as it was once considered an atrocious breach of privacy to photograph a visitor.

One of the Victorian age's most famous women was Angela Burdett-Coutts, who had a fame that was matched only by Queen Victoria and Florence Nightingale. Angela Burdett-Coutts' (1814-1906) first introduction to Harrogate was when she came with her mother, Harriet Mellon, an actress, who appeared on the stage of the Theatre Royal in Church Square.

> *One of the Victorian age's most famous women was Angela Burdett-Coutts*

Mrs Melon made a number of advantageous marriages, including one to the banker Coutts, and then to the Duke of St Albans. On her death in 1837, she left an immense fortune to her daughter Angela, who became the richest woman in England (apart from Queen Victoria) and a target for every fortune hunter in the land.

With happy memories of her mother, it was natural that Angela returned to Harrogate frequently, where she also had a friend in Mr Paley, who owned the Paley estate between Paley Lane (now Oatlands Drive) and Leeds Road.

Unlike many rich ladies of the time, Angela Burdett-Coutts was driven by a very strong social conscience, her particular interests being church and school building in England, the welfare of black people, and the prevention of cruelty to children and animals.

With her great friend Charles Dickens, she set up a home in Shepherds Bush to help women who had turned to a life of theft and prostitution, and Dickens was so impressed by her work that his novel Martin Chuzzlewit was dedicated to her.


OurHeritage

A look at yesteryear of a spa town

First image of famous visitor to Harrogate

With Malcolm Neesam

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The great philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts, photographed in Harrogate, c.1870(S)

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The original article.

It was Angela Burdett-Coutts who established the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty To Children, and was closely involved with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

In order to assist the poor of east London, Angela founded the Columbia Road Market, in 1869, and pioneered social housing in that deprived area of the capital.

The following year, Angela heard Harrogate was building a new suite of Spa Baths, and offered to donate funds for a public clock, but the Improvement Commissioners requested that instead, the clock be placed in the new market they were considering building.

Angela agreed, and in 1874, Harrogate's new market opened, the clock being installed in May 1877.

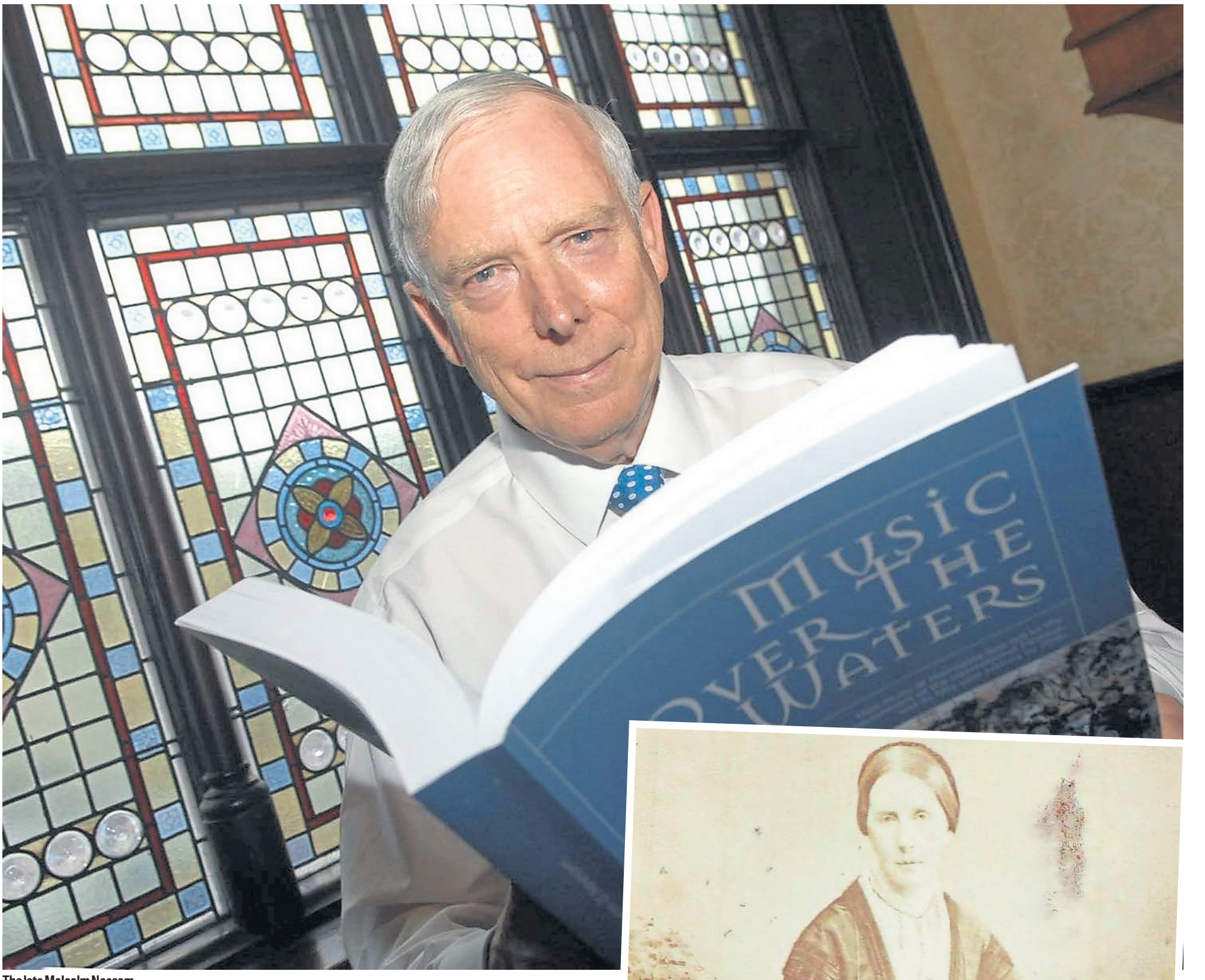
This remarkable lady's other achievements include sending cotton gins to Nigeria, supplying drinking fountains for dogs, donating lifeboats for Brittany, promoting the Irish fishing industry by starting schools and providing boats, placing hundreds of destitute boys in training ships for careers in the navy and merchant service, financing the first archeological survey of Jerusalem in 1864 to improve its sanitation, and aiding the Ragged School Union. She also provided bells for St. Paul's cathedral.

Although there are many portraits of Baroness Burdett-Coutts (she received a peerage from Queen Victoria in 1871) I had never seen a photograph of her in Harrogate, until last month, when I came across an Ebay advertisement by a dealer in the USA for a photograph of a Miss Burdell Louks taken by Harrogate photographer Skeolan.

I bought it, on the guess that it could only be a portrait, of Angela, as indeed it was, so this week's illustration is the first public showing of a rare photograph of one of Victorian England's most extraordinary women, taken in Harrogate in about 1870.

This article was first published on October 4, 2012

A note from Harrogate Civic Society: It is now more than four years since Malcolm's death. He left behind an astonishing body of work that we at the Harrogate Civic Society are determined should be preserved and enhanced for the benefit of future historians and, indeed, for the benefit of anyone who cares about Harrogate.



The late Malcolm Neesam.



Not long before his passing, we discussed with Malcolm and the Advertiser republishing at least some of his articles.

Many of Malcolm's articles dealt with the history of the town, exploring the people, places and events that helped to form the Harrogate we know today. At other times Malcolm concentrated more on contemporary issues.

While acknowledging that Harrogate could not stand still, he was convinced that change should always be tested.

In September 2024, the first re-publication of Mr Neesam's articles appeared.

> *Angela Burdett-Coutts was driven by a very strong social conscience*

We are grateful to Malcolm's family for their approval, to Simon Kent (closely involved with securing Malcolm's legacy) for his work researching and preparing the articles for reprint, for the advice of historian Paul Jennings and to Graham Chalmers and his team at the Advertiser for their support and encouragement.

We hope you will enjoy reading (or in some cases re-reading) these irreplaceable snapshots of history.

If you are able to add to our knowledge, or wish to know more about our work, contact us at: history@harrogatecivicsociety.org