

Contexts: Milton Bryan, Chatsworth and Hyde Park

A chance observation and a trail of discovery led Xavier Edwards to one of the more remarkable men of the nineteenth century



Passing through mid-Bedfordshire, my attention was attracted to an unusual church at Milton Bryan. Attached to an early-modern nave and chancel was a disproportionately large nineteenth-century tower. Gaining the key to the church from the cottage opposite, I noticed a late medieval tombstone below the pulpit. More striking, there was a large stained-glass West window to celebrate the life of Sir Joseph Paxton, a name that rustled a distant memory. When I returned the key,

John Carr told me that Paxton, who designed the 1851 Great Exhibition building in Hyde Park, was born in a cottage that had stood on the small holding just beyond the trees at the bottom of his garden and that Paxton had initially attended the local school (illustrated below), now used as the village hall.

My interest aroused, I visited the county local History collection. What I had been told was confirmed and, as I read more about Paxton, a remarkable life story was revealed. Leaving school at 15, Paxton worked as an apprentice gardener, first in Bedfordshire, then Hertfordshire before, in 1823, he was employed by the Horticultural Society in the reconstruction of their Chiswick garden. While considering emigration to America, in 1826, to improve his prospects, the Duke of Devonshire, noting his neat yet robust appearance, appointed him superintendent of the Chatsworth gardens. There, having gained the confidence of the Duke, he began the construction of the great 300-foot conservatory in the years 1838-40 and he remodelled the Derbyshire village of Edensor.

Following the rejection of 233 plans from around the world for the Great Exhibition, including proposals by George Stephenson and Isambard Brunel, Paxton entered the design competition at the last moment. Paxton's plans, prepared in only nine days, were accepted. The ingenious prefabricated



iron and glass design, first sketched on a piece of blotting paper, was constructed in only eight months by 2,000. As is widely known, the Great Exhibition was a huge success. Paxton, knighted in 1852, went on to supervise its reconstruction on the Crystal Palace site in 1853-4. The latter year he became MP for Coventry and remained so until his death. Over time his activities extended to include management of railways, architecture (including the design of a mansion for Baron Rothschild) and writing. He co-authored several magazines and books on flowers while his own *Practical Treatise on the Culture of the Dahlia* was translated into several languages. His interests made him a wealthy man and he founded a newspaper, the *Daily News*, with Charles Dickens as the first editor. He died at Sydenham in 1865.

Samuel Smiles, author of the mid-Victorian cult book, *Self-Help* (1859), could have been one of Paxton's greatest admirers.



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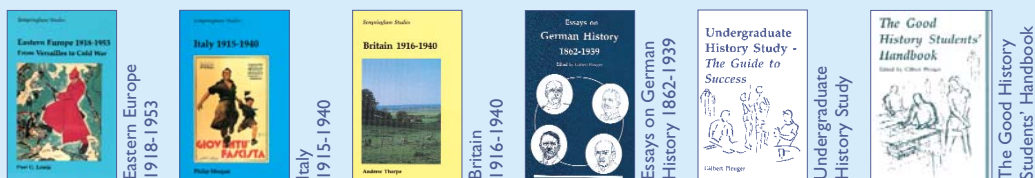


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