

A postcard from lovers' Leap - pride, prejudice and the picturesque: the story of a Peak District legend

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**A POSTCARD FROM LOVERS' LEAP – PRIDE, PREJUDICE AND THE PICTURESQUE,
THE STORY OF A PEAK DISTRICT LEGEND**

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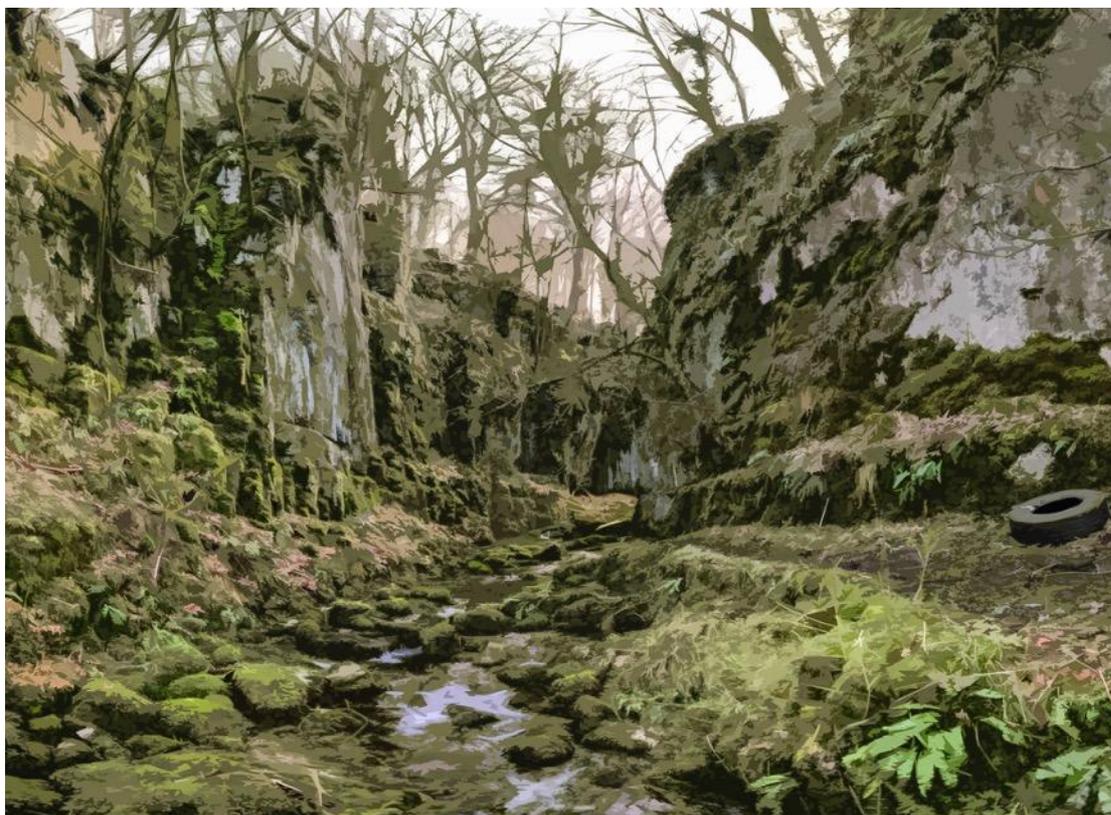


Figure 1: Lover's Leap and The Entrance to Sherbrook Dell, © Andrew Robinson 2021

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Introduction

The legend attached to Buxton's Lover's Leap is distinct from other Derbyshire locations similarly named, and indeed other such locations across the UK and beyond, in that 'leap' concerned is not one of a despondent lover to their death (or miraculous survival) from a lofty precipice, but rather one of young lovers successfully escaping to be married. Unlike the often-tragic outcomes of legends usually attached to sites named Lover's Leap, our escaping lovers successful leap across the void didn't result in any reports of ghosts or hauntings. Nevertheless, the legend did give name to a location that was to provide one of

entrance it marks, is overgrown, largely forgotten and overlooked by those who speed past its hidden entrance as they navigate the narrow curves of the busy A6 along Ashwood Dale on their approach to Buxton.

Buxton's Lover's Leap is a large promontory overlooking the river Wye at the narrowest point of Ashwood Dale a mile south of Buxton in the High Peak of Derbyshire. The Sherbrook, a small tributary of the Wye rises on the slopes of Axe Edge and approaches the river along a shallow valley from the Ashbourne Road (A515) until it falls into a narrow rocky gorge named Sherbrook Dell shortly before joining the River Wye at Lover's Leap. The name Lover's Leap properly belongs to the cliff on the western side of the entrance to the dell however it is sometimes used to describe the whole dell and first appears on a map of the Duke of Devonshire's Buxton lands dated 1775 prior to the town's development as a spa resort (Barker 1775). At this time there was no road along Ashwood Dale and the narrow rocky upper section closest to Buxton was largely inaccessible to all but the most intrepid fishermen, botanist, or geologist. Lover's Leap was accessed from above via a path passing across fields from Buxton and provided striking views of the narrow and rocky upper section of Ashwood Dale and the dramatic dark recesses of Sherbrook Dell. In the summer months access to the Dell itself could be gained, with great care, by climbing down the waterfall and following the stream through the chasm to where it joined the Wye. Following this route, as one descends into the dark and humid narrow limestone gorge, with its mossy, tree lined cliffs towering above and the stream bubbling below, the temperature drops and sounds from the surrounding countryside are deadened. Even in the height of summer this can evoke an uncanny sense of claustrophobia and isolation from the world above, as though one has begun to descend into the rocks themselves, not unlike entering nearby Lud's Church above Gradbach in Staffordshire, a feeling heightened by the memory of those who have met their death here.

An early description of Lover's Leap is found in James Pilkington's guide to Derbyshire published in 1789 and this was to set the tone for the numerous romantic descriptions which would follow emphasising the sublime features of the gorge, and in doing

so helping to establish it as an important site in the development of Buxton as a tourist destination. Pilkington describes Lover's Leap as 'a deep and craggy precipice' and Sherbrook Dell as 'no more than a narrow and tremendous chasm' that 'requires some firmness of mind to be able to look down to the bottom of it, without feeling some degree of terror' (Pilkington, 1789: 17). Further detail is provided by a gentleman writer in *Sketches of Buxton*:

you come to a place called the Lovers' Leap, where nature roams majestically wild, knowing no laws save those her God hath made. Indeed, it is one of the most romantic spots I ever saw. It consists of a narrow valley, with very high and rugged rocks on each side of it, and a murmuring stream running at the bottom intercepted every now and then by huge masses of stone, which have perhaps, at some remote period, fallen from the adjacent rocks, whilst various trees, growing out of different clefts, and nodding over the valley, heighten the beauty of the scene (*La Belle Assemblée* 1806: 589)

Leaping Lovers

When Pilkington visited Buxton in 1789 the site was already identified on maps as Lover's Leap (Barker 1775) although no description of the legend linked to this name has been found earlier than 1802 (Britton and Brayley 1802) the association of this beauty spot with a legend of leaping lovers lends a romantic mythology to the site and provides a memorable and appealing name for the tourists who would soon visit. Writing in *The History of Buxton and Visitors Guide* the poet and writer Arthur Jewitt comments that he believes 'there is a Lover's Leap in every mountainous country' (1811:168) and indeed sites with this name exist the world over, usually associated with tales of heartbroken lovers throwing themselves off lofty precipices and either miraculously surviving or being tragically dashed to death on the rocks below. Many of these also have tales of hauntings or other supernatural events related to the tragic deaths that took place there.

Academic study of the folklore and legends associated with such sites has been relatively limited with most research focusing on the variants found in North America (see for instance Payton and Payton 2020). The majority of the more than sixty-five documented North American Lover's Leap legends (ibid pp. 347) involve an Indigenous American princess, prevented from marrying her true love by her tribe, who then leaps to her death often with her lover, from a high cliff, waterfall or bridge. Many of the legends also include reports of a related haunting where the ghosts of the women or the couple can be seen jumping or kissing, often when the moon is full, accompanied by the sounds of screaming, sobbing or whispering (somethingspooky 2019). One of the best-known Irish ghost stories from County Wicklow tells how a young woman was tempted from her lover by another who wooed her away with his 'dash and charm'. Ridden with guilt after her true love died of a broken heart, she slowly lost her mind, before, convinced her lover had risen from the grave, she followed his ghost to the top of a huge crag above the Dargle and threw herself to her death in the river below. She is believed to return to this Lover's Leap every midsummer eve in the form of a ghostly figure, a dove or a white fawn (Dunne, 1977).

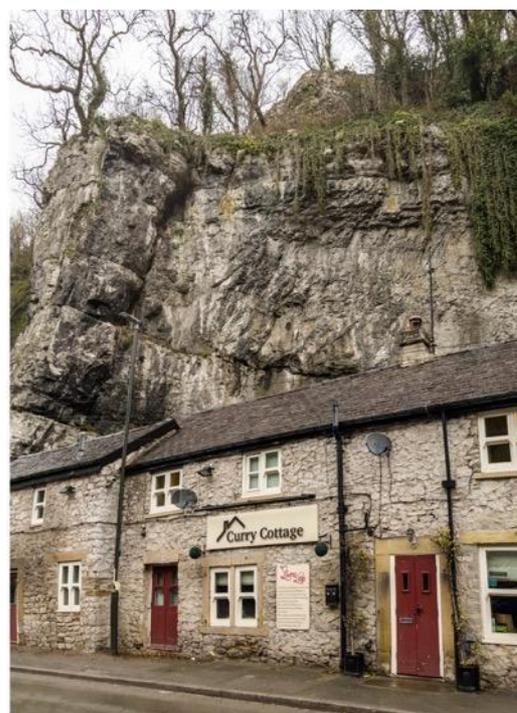
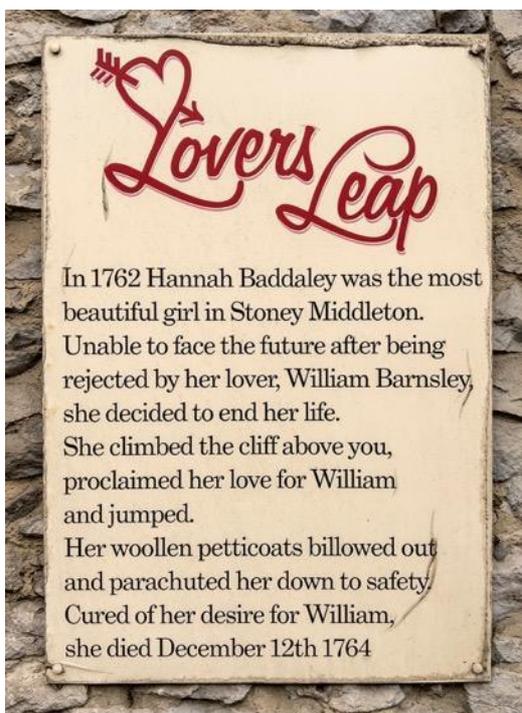


Figure 3: Lover's Leap interpretation board, Curry Cottage, Stoney Middleton, Derbyshire. © Andrew Robinson 2022.

That high precipices, with sheer cliffs above rocky gorges, should be chosen as suicide spots resulting in tales of hauntings is not surprising and reports of tragic deaths or miraculous survivals resulting falls from British locations known as Lover's Leap frequently appear in 18th and 19th century newspapers. In 1769 the *St. James's Chronicle* provides a typical report of one such attempt by a young woman who:

stimulated by a fit of revenge when not being suffered to marry a young man with whom she had for some time kept company; and imagining it was not possible to live without him, she determined to take the lover's leap herself... (*St. James' Chronicle* or *The British Evening Post*, April 25, 1769 – April 27, 1769).

Despite a vertical fall of more than thirty feet from a 'stupendous rock' onto the 'loose craggy stones below' (*ibid.*) she survived unharmed and afterwards walked home.

Aside from the example near Buxton, two other well-known sites named Lover's Leap with associated legends exist within the Peak District, one in the popular tourist location of Dovedale and the other on the edge of the town of Stoney Middleton. At Stoney Middleton, the location acquired its name after a well-documented suicide attempt by a local woman, Hannah Baddeley, in c1762. who, after being jilted by her lover William Barnsley (Cowen 1910), neatly folded her cloak, gloves and bonnet before throwing herself off the eighty-foot-high cliff only to survive when her skirts caught on branches (Northern Star 1817). In some versions, the skirts are said to have billowed out like a parachute slowing her fall sufficiently for her to escape and walk away with just a few cuts and bruises (Bell 1993). Despite surviving her fall, Hannah died, unmarried, of natural causes two years later. Her restless ghost is reported to haunt both the cliff top and the house below, now an Indian restaurant named the 'Curry Cottage'. In 2007 the first episode of Series 10 of the investigative paranormal series, *Most Haunted – Midsummer Murders*, visited Stoney Middleton and medium David Wells 'felt' the presence of Hannah in the Village, on the cliffs and in the restaurant below. The information he was able to extract however was limited,

providing details that could as easily be found on the interpretation board in the nearby village or the notice which still adorns the exterior of the restaurant.

There is a similar story attached to another 'Lover's Leap' in nearby Dovedale where an un-named woman reportedly threw herself off a lofty precipice during the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815) mistakenly believing her true love had been killed only to be saved when her clothing caught on branches and broke her fall (Bell 1993). The couple were reunited when her husband arrived home a few days later. A rocky outcrop named Lover's Leap also overlooks the tourist town of Matlock Bath, however no legend seems to be associated with this location and the town is better known for its attractive Lovers Walks along the side of the Derwent. In nearby Lathkill Dale, a rock is named after the unfortunate Jane Hambleton who threw herself from the precipice at the behest of her lover who promised to marry her if she would prove her love in such a way. She survived unscathed and proved her love in this way once more before dying on her third attempt, freeing her lover from his promise (Castle 2010, Bell 1993). Derbyshire's Lover's Leaps would seem to have achieved legendary status through a single largely unsuccessful act, to which a romantic narrative has become attached, rather than through repeated use as a suicide spot in the way that locations such as the Bristol Suspension Bridge and Beachy Head have.

The Legend of Lover's Leap and Sherbrook Dell

Whilst the name Lover's Leap provides an intriguing means by which the high promontory at Sherbrook Dell can be identified on itineraries, maps and guidebooks, it would seem the legend itself has only limited currency for visitors and no ghosts have been associated with this legend, possibly due to the fact the lovers escaped unscathed to be happily wed. Most tourist publications if they mention the legend at all, only do so in passing focusing instead on romantic descriptions of this 'place of gnomes and fairies' (Gilcrest 1911: 13). An early telling of the Legend of Lover's Leap is to be found in the volume three of *The Beauties of England and Wales* published in 1802. Here a brief reference describes Lover's Leap as 'a vast precipice that forms one side of a narrow chasm... from the summit of which a lovelorn

female is reported to have flung herself into the rocky gulf below' (1802). This version of the legend is repeated almost word for word in the Rev R. Ward's guidebook to Buxton published 24 years later (Ward 1926) while in Ward and Lock's Illustrative Guide of 1880 the lovelorn female's 'fall was broken by a tree, and her life was saved, but she remained a cripple for the remainder of her days' (Ward Lock 1880).

These narratives mirror those attached to Derbyshire's other Lover's Leaps and indeed those found elsewhere however the legend more commonly associated with Buxton's Lover's Leap is more distinctive. The earliest telling of this alternate version so far discovered appears on a penny handbill containing a prose poem promoting Buxton through several local legends. 'The Legend of Lover's Leap &c' tells how an eloping couple escaped their pursuers by jumping the void:

....'tis hard to be constru'd
A couple were eloping and hotly were pursued;
The Ladies horse had cast a shoe during their hurri'd ride,
And chances were against him and his affanc'd bride;
But swiftly a seat securing, behind her faithful lover,
A leap was taken safely across the foaming river (Bates 1864).

The tourist handbill, dedicated to 'the patrons of this favourite resort' links three different Derbyshire Lover's Leap legends with Sherbrook Dell, that of the runaway lovers outlined above, the Stoney Middleton 'balloon like... parachute' decent and what would seem to be a variant of Jane Hambleton's story – in which a lover promises all his wealth and love to his true love if she proves her love by leaping the dell upon her horse before he realises the danger and stops her just in time. The publisher Joseph Bates of Buxton would seem to be covering all bases to promote Buxton as a land of myth, legend and mystery and indeed goes on to mention the visit of Mary Queen of Scots, links with Robin Hood and the tale of Poole the Bandit in the same handbill. As a Buxton based bookseller, stationer, printer, and

newsagent, it was in Bates' interest to attract tourists to the town and as joint publisher of the *Buxton Advertiser* and the *Buxton Herald* he was instrumental in promoting the resort during the mid-late nineteenth century (Langham & Wells 1996). It is however the eloping lover's version of the legend which is the one most often linked to Sherbrook Dell, and this is retold in varying forms across numerous publications from this point onwards.

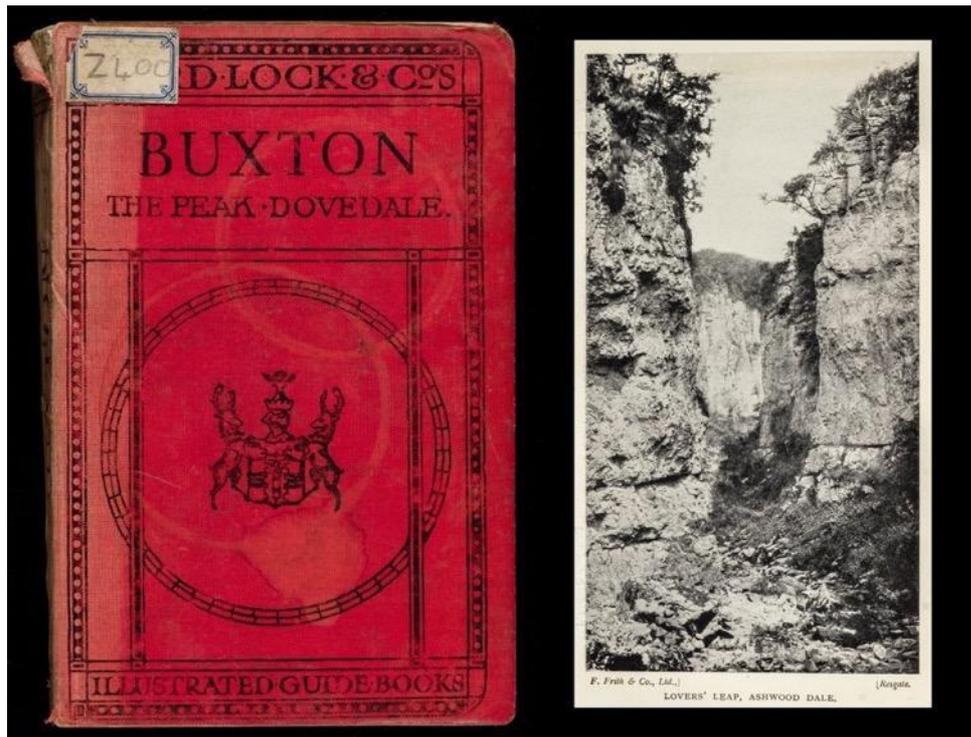


Figure 4: Lovers' Leap, Ashwood Dale. Ward, Lock & Co's Buxton, The Peak, Dovedale. 13th Edition 1913/14. Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022

Given that the tale of the eloping lovers on Bates' handbill (1864) is the first known recorded version of the legend, it is possible that it was created at this time to provide a romantic explanation of the location's name. However, as both the other legends included would seem to have been derived from pre-existing narratives linked to other locations, it is possible that the story of runaway lovers, which appears to be unique to Buxton, may truly belong to Sherbrook Dell. It is not unusual for tourist guides of this period to contain mistakes and factual errors, with author's paraphrasing or directly plagiarising the words of previous writers and perpetuating earlier errors. The earliest known reference to the site as

Lover's Leap dates to 1775 and the name may have been associated with the location for much longer before being appearing on maps. Indeed some versions of the legend place the event in the early years of the 18th century.

Simpson (1991: 25) identifies a legend as a local folktale that 'centres upon some specific place, person or object which really exists or has existed within the knowledge of those telling and hearing the story' and which is 'told as true' and 'given maximum plausibility by being brought into close association with the physical localisation of the tale'. For Buxton the function of the legend, which indeed helps preserve it, is in its association with a romantic and picturesque tourist location along with its death defying and life affirming optimism. Simpson observes that a moralising function is often associated with local legends (1991: 30), and here the moral of 'love will conquer all' and the flight to a Church outside ecclesiastical control, whilst at odds with both society's formal morality and parental wishes, functions to satisfy popular or romantic morals. The narrative of the runaway lovers is retold in a highly embellished form in an article promoting the beauty spot published in the *Derby Mercury* in 1883. where the 'romantic legend' set in 'the days of chivalry' begins with 'once upon a time' and involves 'a fair damsel' and a 'gallant lover' (*Derby Mercury* 1883) and in doing so transcends Simpson's definition of legend and enters the realm of fairy-tale being told for entertainment (Simpson 1991: 25).

That tales of heartbroken lovers throwing themselves from lofty precipices or runaway lovers leaping impossible voids should have attracted romantic writers of the mid 1800s is hardly surprising and Lover's Leap legends from around the world proved to be popular subject matter for British periodicals during this period. The author of *Laura Doone*, R.D. Blackmore, published his own reworking of a Lover's Leap legend from Devon accompanied by a dramatic full-page illustration by Marcus Stone, in *The Illustrated London News* (Blackmore 1873 – figure 5). 'Frida or The Legend of Lover's Leap' blends real people, locations, and events with romantic fiction in a retelling of the legend surrounding the mysterious death of the last of the Wichehalses, a prominent West Country family. In the preface of *Lorna Doone*, published four years before *Frida*, Blackmore explains that in

fictionalising real locations, people, and events he neither 'dares, nor desires, to claim for it the dignity or... the difficulty of an historical novel' (Blackmore 1869). Sutton (1974) suggests that Lorna Doone gave the area 'the aura of a mythic landscape' because the characters are 'spirits of a place and the mind seeks the place that matches their reality' (Sutton 1974: 435).



Figure 5: 'The Lover's Leap' drawn by Marcus Stone, *The Illustrated London News*, 13th December 1873. Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022

In a similar fashion Joseph Bates and others who romanticised and promoted the legend linked to Sherbrook Dell were attempting just this, to establish the site and the surrounding countryside as a mythic and uncanny landscape of folk heroes, brigands and robbers, tragic queens, and runaway lovers and by doing so further promote Buxton as a tourist attraction. Most subsequent retellings avoid fanciful embellishments and maintain the

more sober tone of the legend where supernatural or fantastic elements are given plausibility through their close association with physical landscape (Simpson 1991: 25).

Might there then be any truth to the Buxton legend? Could a runaway couple, fleeing to be married, have leaped across the chasm to escape their pursuers? No evidence of who these young lovers were, or where they travelled to or from exists however there is nearby a church which for 150 years acted as the English Gretna Green. Peak Forest Chapel was built in 1657 by Christiana, Countess of Devonshire in the Royal Forest of the Peak and, as an extra parochial area outside the control of the ecclesiastical authorities, maintained the right to grant marriage licences with no need for banns or witnesses. Many couples fled to Peak Forest when wishing to marry without permission a practice which continued until as late as 1803 (Burton 1966). Another famous Peak District legend tells of a young couple named Allan and Clara who also eloped to be married at Peak Forest Chapel only to be brutally murdered for their money in Winnats Pass near Castleton by a group of local miners (Henderson 2010). Reports of their ghosts haunting the pass were made as early as 1884 when, according to 'local legend' the death cry of the lovers is carried on the wind that 'screams down the narrow pass on a wild night' (Bradbury 1884) and sightings continue to be reported to this day (Henderson, 2010 pp. 111-112). Bad luck, early death and insanity were reportedly visited upon those guilty of their murder with some suggesting that they had been cursed (ibid, pp. 113). Although no record of a runaway couple sharing a weary horse arriving from Ashwood Dale to be wed at Peak Forest Chapel exists, the Church's ability to grant marriage licences certainly fits the time frame of the legend well.

Given the existence of a suitable church less than a 30-minute horse ride away we come to the question as to whether our runaway lovers could have jumped across Sherbrook Dell on a shared horse? Comparisons of photographs dating from the mid-19th century with the morphology of the current dell reveal that, whilst retaining its overall shape and form it has seen numerous changes. Rocks have fallen from the sides filling the riverbed and reducing the height of the waterfall. In addition, the original peak of the rocky precipice itself was cut back to allow the passage of the turnpike road in 1811 and the area has

subsequently been planted with trees. It is therefore impossible to estimate how feasible a leap across the dell may or may not have been in the early years of the 18th century. At its opening the current entrance to the dell would seem far too wide to be jumped and writing in *Pictures of the Peak* Bradbury doubts that 'passion-stricken couples, with less sense "than settlements" could have bounded on horse-back across such yawning chasms as the Lover's Leap'. He goes on to suggest that 'even the redoubtable Dick Turpin's Black Bess 'would have "shied" at the deep wide gorge in Ashwood Dale' (Bradbury 1891:148). Nevertheless, at some points just a short distance upstream a desperate leap across the dell would certainly seem to be possible given the longest recorded jump by horse is 27.5 feet (Fédération Equestre Internationale 2003).

Both the Buxton and Stoney Middleton legends share narrative elements with a strange and tragic accident that took place in Dovedale on 28 July 1761 when the Revd. Langton, Dean of Clogher, Ireland, age 62, and Miss Laroche, 31, who had been sharing a horse, tumbled from a lofty precipice into the dale below (Bott 1795). Miss Laroche survived after her hair and clothing became entangled in bushes however Langton was fatally injured and died two days later (Britton and Brayley 1802: 426). The sharing of a horse, a fall from a precipice into a rocky dale and the snagging of clothes saving a lady from certain death, are echoed in the legends outlined above and it's possible that elements of this true event may have found their way into the folklore narratives attached to other Derbyshire Lover's Leaps.

Pride and Prejudice: Tourism in the High Peak

To examine the role played by the legend of Lover's Leap and the development of Sherbrook Dell as a tourist site, we first need to understand a little of the development of Buxton. Well into the mid-eighteenth-century Buxton remained as little more than a small settlement close to a well of healing waters and an ancient hall. John Speed's map of Derbyshire first published in 1611 includes Buxton and Matlock as only hamlets while the map of Derbyshire in *Chorographia Britanniae* (Bradeslade 1741 – figure 6), despite naming Poole's Hole and the village of Chelmorton nearby, fails to include Buxton at all.

Buxton's growth would be largely driven by tourism based upon the restorative qualities of the air, the healing waters, and the appeal of the surrounding landscape, and the Seven Wonders of the Peak summarised by the enlightenment philosopher Thomas Hobbes as 'of the High Peak are seven wonders writ. Two founts, two caves. One pallace, mount and pit' (Hobbes 1626).



Figure 6: A Map of Derbyshire by Thomas Badesdale and W.H.Thoms from *Chorographia Britanniae*, 1742. Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022

Hobbes toured the district while working for the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth and may have been promoting the area for the Duke. The Seven Wonders became a convenient travel itinerary for the aristocracy and the increasingly mobile and adventurous upper classes during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century with Buxton attracting a steady flow of visitors during the summer season. Following the improved access provided by turnpike roads (1724-1765) and the development of the town by the 5th Duke between 1780 and 1808, Buxton began to quickly grow in importance as a popular spa resort, however the surrounding landscape remained problematic for visitors.

Until the mid-eighteenth century, visitors typically viewed and appreciated the British landscape for its geological, mineral, and scientific interest (Binder 2011: 84), however as the century progressed, this gave way to a search for landscapes that provided aesthetic pleasure inspired by the Grand Tour and the romantic movement (Binder 75-77). Binder suggests that the experience of the sublime was a major attraction for those undertaking a

tour of the peak with the picturesque landscape one of the most important marketing tools in the promotion of Derbyshire to potential visitors (Binder 99). Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and Gilpin's *Essays and Observations on Picturesque Beauty* (1772-1798) provided guidance for 'picturesque tourist' and few locations satisfied their search for the sublime. Landscapes would ideally include unusual, striking, dramatic, elegant, and forbidding, rock formations however these should be softened by trees, shrubs and rare plants and animated by the flow of water, cascading over cliffs, or bubbling through rocks and enlivening the surrounding mosses and plants with a glistening sheen.

Buxton's isolated location amongst the treeless, windswept limestone hills of the High Peak disadvantaged the town compared with towns such as Bakewell and Matlock surrounded by the more fertile and luxuriant lands of the Derbyshire Dales to the south. Many writers criticised the scenery around Buxton which was found to be lacking in picturesque beauty and struggled to evoke the sublime and impress the ever more demanding cultured tourist. In their 1802 guide *The Beauties of England and Wales* Britton and Brayley were typically dismissive of the area:

The village of Buxton is situated in the midst of the most dreary and cheerless scenery which the Peak of Derbyshire exhibits; and were it not for the deserved reputation of its mineral waters, would undoubtedly be deserted and forgotten. (1802 Vol 3: p430)

Gilpin complained of its 'dreary hills' spoiled by 'offensive' limestone kilns (Gilpin 1771: 213) while others considered it one of the most 'barren and cheerless spots in England' (Jewitt, 1811: 89). Pilkington (1789) grew weary 'beholding scenes so totally destitute of beauty and variety' and found the moors of Derbyshire 'unpleasing and even disgusting to the imagination' with their only value being 'by way of contrast to heighten the beauty of the dales and valleys' (Pilkington 23). In response, in addition to continuing the redevelopment

of the town itself, the 5th and the 6th Duke took substantial steps to improve the surrounding landscape. Planting on the tops of hills to soften the visual appearance and hide the quarries and lime workings was begun under the 5th Duke as early as 1783 (Spencer 1783) and was greatly extended by the 6th Duke who in January 1812 ordered 40,000 trees for the Buxton estate. This continued well into the mid-nineteenth century slowly encircling Buxton with verdant plantations (Hembly 1990: 224). Large areas of the High Peak were effectively landscaped by the Duke's planting programme to provide more pleasing views for visitors however it was Lover's Leap and Sherbrook Dell that would provide a suitably sublime and uncanny location to satisfy the 'picturesque tourist'.



Figure 7: Buxton Parliamentary Enclosure Plans 1771, (Lover's Leap top right corner of field 25) 1771. (Derbyshire Record Office - Q/R1 26)

A Ride to Lover's Leap

Lovers' Leap was one of the few Buxton locations unconditionally praised for its sublime and picturesque beauty and as such provided an important asset in the promotion of Buxton as a destination for the 'picturesque tourist'. However, when Pilkington visited to peer down into the 'tremendous chasm' in 1786 there was no direct access to the site and in order to reach

the top of Lover's Leap he would have had to walk or ride across the rocky Geald Field from upper Buxton (field 25 in the Buxton Parliamentary Enclosure Plans 1771) or from the higher reaches of the Wye (field 24); or follow a path along the side of the Shirebrook (field 26) from the Ashbourne Road a mile away (Buxton Parliamentary Enclosure Plans 1771 – figure 7).

In 1795 the 5th Duke constructed the New Ride, a private carriage way connecting the town with Lover's Leap and Ashwood Dale. The purpose of the 'Dukes' Drive' as it became known, was to provide a new circular route for tourists and visitors providing access to the top of Lover's Leap. Here carriages could park close to the duke's beauty spot where dramatic and picturesque views of Ashwood Dale and Sherbrook Dell might be enjoyed. Access to the Wye valley below was provided by 'cat' steps or ladders cut into a cleft in the rock face which took visitors down to the edge of the river and the entrance to Sherbrook Dell. These 'cat ladders' are described by Jewitt as:

a number of rude steps worn in one of the fissures of the rocks, by which everyone who visits the Lover's-Leap and the Cataract, are obliged to descend and ascend. The passage is not very safe, but the beauties which open to the view of the adventurer, when he has made the descent, are worth a little care and trouble (1811: XXV).

As visitor numbers increased Lover's Leap grew to become one of the key sites to visit alongside the Crescent, the Pavilion Gardens, St Ann's Well and Poole's Cavern. Writing in 1817 Rhodes suggests that 'a more picturesque place could hardly be found' describing cliffs 'broken into romantic masses' with the cascade falling into the basin 'composed of fragments of rock' amongst which 'the water frets against itself into the whitest foam' and 'every flower that blossoms there are bright with spray and gemmed with drops of light' (Rhodes 1817: 90-91).

The importance of Lover's Leap as the most picturesque and sublime location Buxton had to offer should not be underestimated and indeed the route of the New Ride was

in no small way a recognition of this. One might wonder if the Duke was attempting to facilitate a form of legend tripping (Ellis 1996 p. 438-440) whereby groups of young aristocrats attracted by the legend and the uncanny feel of the place might excitedly drive their carriages along the New Ride at dusk to peer over Lover's Leap before daring each other to descend the dangerous cat steps and explore the rocky depths of Sherbrook Dell by candlelight, all the while imagining the flight of two eloping lovers and their death defying leap across the void above them. This is unlikely however as the 'trippers' for whom the ride was built were as much in search of the sublime as the legend so 'sublime tripping' might be more apt. Nevertheless, the legend remained important in providing an evocative identifier for the location linking it to a mythical past alongside tales of Poole the bandit, rumours of Robin Hood and the intrigue surrounding Mary Queen of Scots's imprisonment at the nearby Hall.

At the time the New Ride was built the nearby dales were 'unopened by roads and... practically a sealed book to many visitors' (Bates 1858: 10) and the Duke apparently planned a further private road or picturesque ride to take visitors along the full length of the hard to access but picturesque Wye valley towards Ashford. Ultimately this private road was never built being replaced by the Duke's Buxton to Ashford Turnpike in 1811 (Roberts 1992: 89). The road opened Ashwood Dale providing a drive of four miles that was 'exceedingly rich and beautiful' (Adam 1851: 311) and further improved access to Lover's Leap and the entrance to Sherbrook Dell. Roberts (1992: 23) notes the scenic nature of the Buxton to Ashford turnpike suggesting that 'it may well be that the entire route was 'landscaped' to create a harmonious effect'. One might wonder if any 'landscaping' of Sherbrooke Dell itself took place in addition to the Cat Ladders to increase its appeal to those in search of the sublime. It was however a different form of landscaping that drew the criticism of writers when prominent rocks at the narrowest section of Ashwood Dale, including the original face of Lover's Leap and the 'cat' steps, were removed by blasting to allow the passage of the turnpike road. At same time the Wye itself was channelled in a concrete culvert for a distance alongside the turnpike to the disgust of many (Dodd 1974, Roberts 2016: 7). Jowett

penned a romantic poem lamenting the damage wrought on this section of the dale asking 'Where are those clamb'ring steps, so rude and steep? Where the high pinnacle of Lovers' Leap?' (Roberts, 2016: 7). Nevertheless, visitors and travel writers continued to be attracted by the picturesque and sublime features of the gorge along with the range of natural fauna and flora found within and sang its praises with few guidebooks of the period failing to describe the dell in glowing terms.



Figure 8: View of Sherbrook Dell, from 'Chantrey's Peak Scenery' 1886. Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022

Buxton was finally connected to the railway network in May 1863 with the line from Derby passing through Ashwood Dale resulting in a further narrowing of the river and valley. The new railway brought a new class of tourist, the day tripper and Buxton thrived. Whilst the addition of turnpike and railway vastly improved tourist access to the site they also

provided increased access for industrial development. Writing in 1905 Frith found this 'fine gorge of the infant Wye, with noble crags and glorious trees' to be 'irreparably spoilt by industrialism' with a 'hideous' railway embankment, 'odious limekilns on a gigantic scale' and the river 'made in places to run - like a sewer - in a narrow concrete channel'. (Frith 1905:147). Nevertheless, Lovers' Leap was still found to have a 'fascinating appearance' and remained one of the key sites to visit in Buxton. Writing in 1911 Gilchrist describes Ashwood Dale as 'one of the most interesting walks in this vicinity' and Sherbrook Dell as 'a wonderful little ravine' which 'except in times of drought... has a fascinating appearance; it is like the scene of some old story of gnomes and fairies' (Gilchrist, 1911:13).

Picturing Lover's Leap



Figure 9: Waterfall Lovers' Dell Buxton, Rock and Co No. 2177, Pub by W.D. Sutton, July 1st, 1858. Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022

Images of Lover's Leap and Ashwood Dale have appeared in guidebooks of the area from the early 1800s through to the 1950s while numerous lithographic prints, photographs and postcards of the site were produced for sale to tourists. In early guides, where the

number of illustrated plates was limited, Lover's Leap is the often only image to be found representing Buxton suggesting the importance of its visual appearance to both the town and tourist. The painter J.M.W. Turner visited Ashwood Dale during his sketching tour of 1831 producing four or more pencil drawings including at least three views of Lover's Leap (Turner c1831), similar in composition to Chantrey's earlier engraving in Rhode's *Peak Scenery* (1824) which is typical of numerous other representations that followed (figure 8).

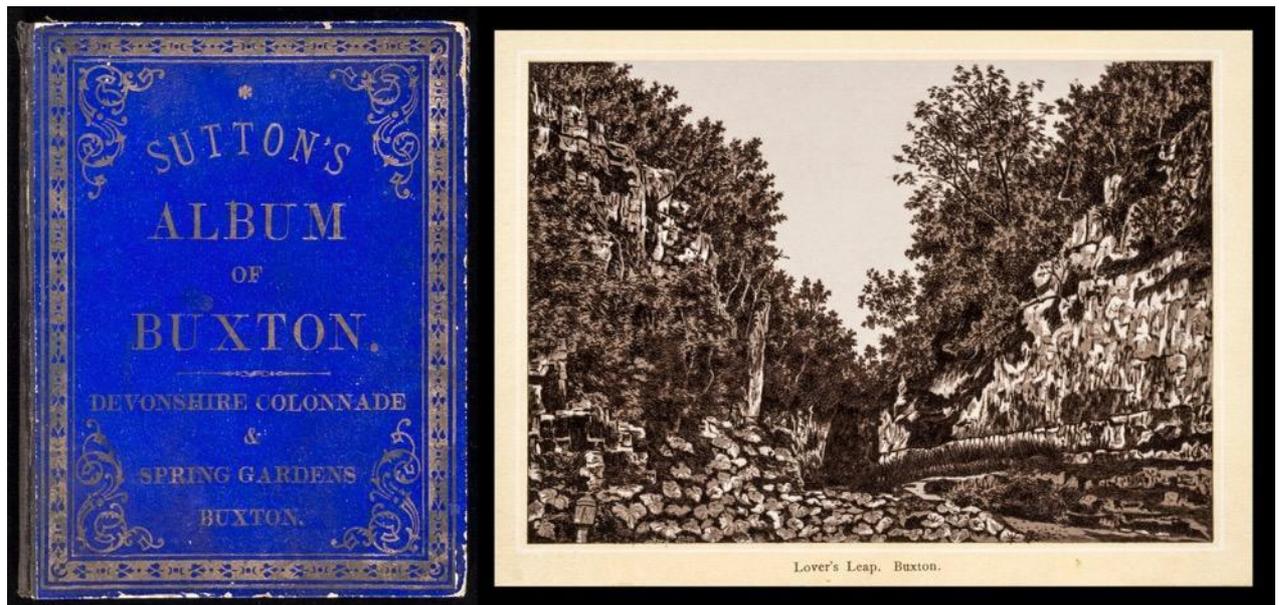


Figure 10: Lover's Leap, Buxton in 'Sutton's Album of Buxton' c1870. Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022



Figure 11: "Lover's Leap", W. G. Baxter, *Pen and Ink Sketches of Scenes and Incidents in Buxton*, c1870. Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022

Early prints and photographs often show couples promenading along Ashwood Dale to visit Lover's Leap and in some a stall can be seen at the entrance providing refreshments. Often artists seem to have a problem with scale exaggerating the height of both the surrounding cliffs and waterfall which in reality is at most ten feet high. Albums of prints, illustrations and photographs of Buxton, often published by local souvenir shops, were popular with tourists with Lover's Leap appearing alongside images of the Crescent, the Grand Stables and the Pavilion Gardens (figure 10). The difficulties of accessing Lover's Leap and navigating the rocky dell to view the waterfall was lampooned by the cartoonist W. G. Baxter in his publication *Pen and Ink Sketches of Scenes and Incidents in Buxton* published circa 1870 (figure 11). Francis Frith who founded his photographic business in Chesterfield in 1860, visited Lover's Leap numerous times between 1862 and 1894 producing photographic prints for sale to tourists (Frith 2022). Other visitors produced their own photographs and lantern slides, usually photographing the entrance to the dell or a view of the waterfall from within the gorge (figure 12).

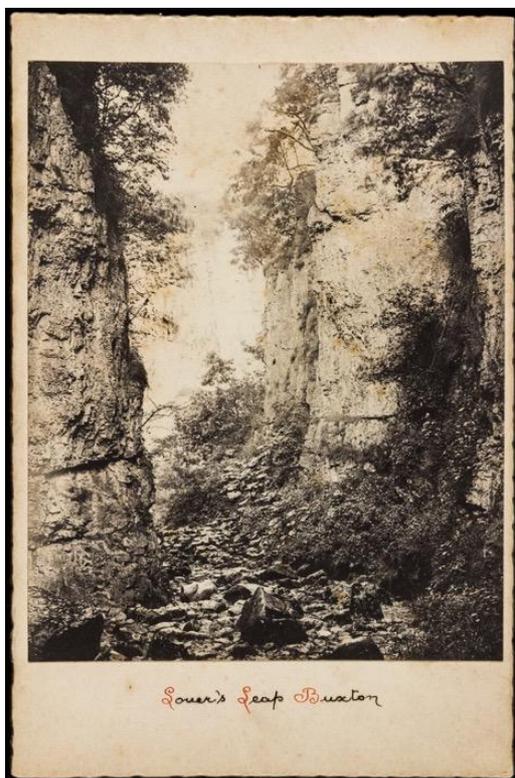


Figure 12: Lover's Leap, Buxton. Hand Titled Albumen Print, C1880. Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022

The site even appeared in stereoscopic views published in the United States (figure 13), however it was in the form of the photographic postcard that Lovers' Leap was more commonly represented, and a huge number of different variants exist for such a geographically small location (the gorge is approximately 300 metres long and between three and ten metres wide). Many tourist attractions are represented in tourist guides, on picture postcards, and other souvenirs through only one or two different views which are then endlessly repeated by successive postcard makers and amateur photographers. For instance, almost all depictions of Lover's Leap in nearby Stoney Middleton adopt an identical viewpoint looking up Middleton Dale towards the promontory from the opposite side of the street with the Lover's Leap pub tucked beneath the cliff (see figure 3 above).

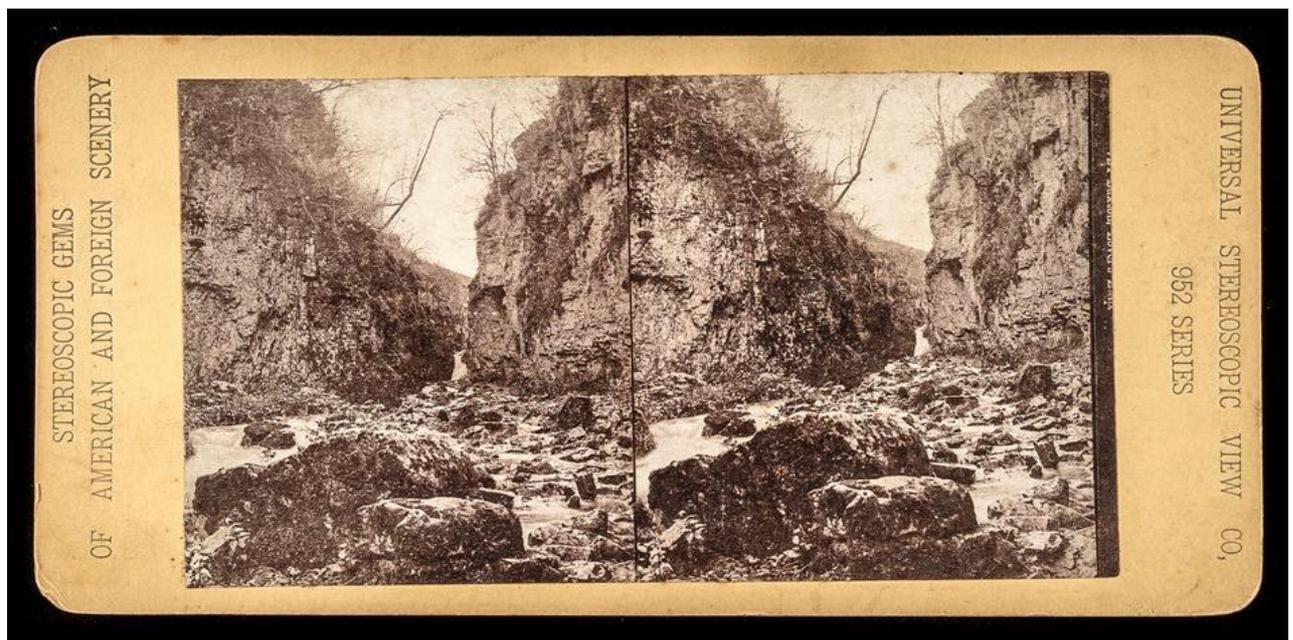


Figure 13: *Stereoscopic Gems of America and Foreign Scenery*, Universal Stereoscopic View Co. c1880. Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022

In contrast, the photographers and artists who have pictured Buxton's Lover's leap have produced images from a wide range of different viewpoints (figure 14). These include views along on the turnpike road adjoining the Dell and of the entrance to Lovers' Leap, views under Lover's Leap itself and looking back at the road from inside the gorge, views of the distant waterfall and from close to the waterfall during the dry season along with romanticised interpretations of the waterfall.



Figure 14: Photographic Postcards of Lover's Leap, various publishers, c1900-1918
 Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022



Figure 15: 'Lover's Leap' by W.E.J. Dean, Royal Crown Derby. C1935 / 'Buxton Lover's Leap', Art Deco Ware. C1930. Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022

From above Lovers' Leap views are provided looking both into the gorge and along Ashwood Dale. These numerous variants have then been rephotographed time and again

over many years leading to huge numbers of visual representations of the site. Amongst the wide range of vintage postcards of Buxton currently available for sale on online auction sites, only the Crescent and the Pavilion Gardens return more results. Lover's Leap also features across a range of other 20th century material culture including a highly romanticised and inaccurate view of Sherbrook Dell on a LMS poster advertising Buxton published in 1924, a Royal Crown Derby display plate from the 1930s (figure 15); a Shell petrol advertisement from 1936 and cigarette cards from the 1920s and 1940s (figure 16).

Of the hundreds or perhaps thousands of images of Lover's Leap and Sherbrook Dell produced since the early 19th century few if any depict the eloping couple choosing instead to emphasise the picturesque and sublime features of the limestone gorge, in particular its high cliff faces, the rocky stream bed, verdant vegetation and dramatic waterfall from a range of viewpoints. Here the legend or myth being constructed is one of a sublime and picturesque tourist location rather than a romantic tale of true love conquering all. Likewise, whilst most artefacts continue to refer to the site as Lover's Leap rather than Sherbrook Dell or Ashwood Dale, the legend that gave the site its name is largely overlooked only to be found outlined in brief in the pages of a few guidebooks. The main function of the legend for much of the 19th and 20th century would seem to be in simply providing a romantic and evocative name for this tourist beauty spot with the narrative of the eloping lovers largely forgotten.

Life Imitating Myth

Whilst the legend attached to Buxton's Lover's Leap is a cheerier one than most of those attached to locations similarly named, Sherbrook Dell has seen its fair share of tragedy, largely visited upon those attracted to the spot by tourist literature promoting its picturesque qualities. Tourist guides encouraged visitors to enjoy the views from the top of Lover's Leap and experience the uncanny terror of peering down into the dark chasm beneath before descending to explore the hidden recesses of Sherbrook Dell and view the waterfall at its end.

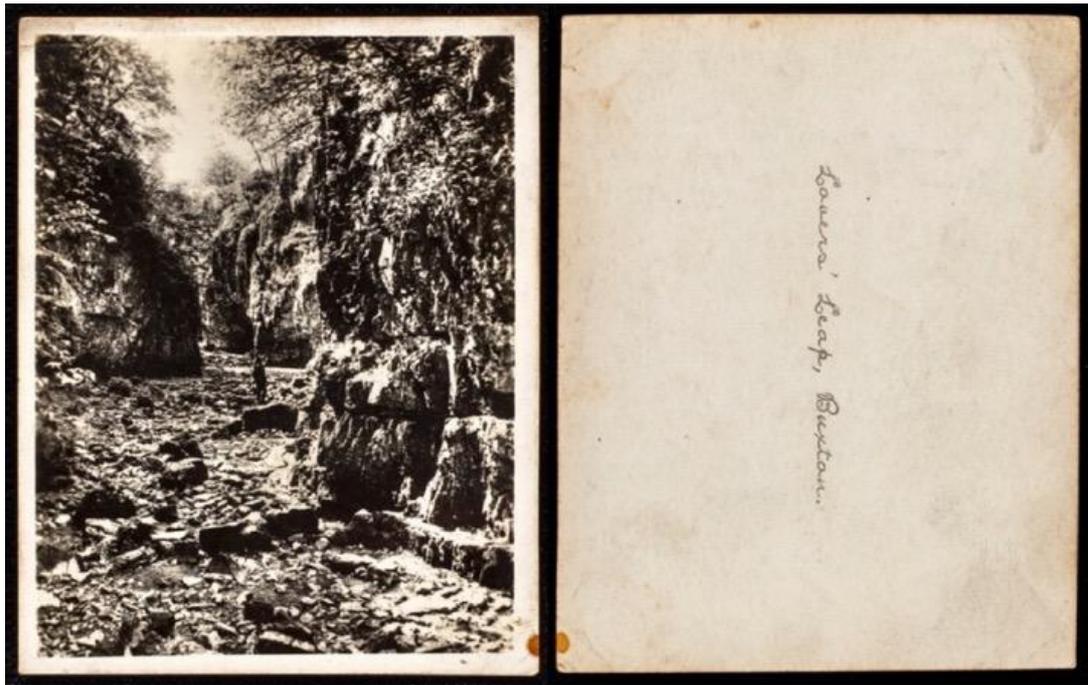


Figure 16: Lovers' Leap, Buxton. Cigarette Card. C1940.
Authors collection, image © A Robinson 2022

The lack of safety barriers or fencing on the overgrown and rocky crags resulted in numerous injuries due to people slipping and falling (rather than leaping) into the chasm or being hit by falling rocks dislodged by those above, often reported in the newspapers of the day. On 17 September 1866 George Mitchelson a 41-year-old former gentleman's coachman, at the time an in-patient at the Devonshire Hospital, visited Lover's Leap with his son. While showing the spot to other visitors he exclaimed 'It's not much of a leap at all' and moments later slipped and rolled over the precipice falling to his death (*The Ilkeston Pioneer* 1866). Alice Higgenbothom, aged 10, was luckier, on 21 May 1899 while collecting wildflowers at the top of Lover's Leap she slipped off the cliff, but was caught by a tree and landed on a narrow ledge 40 feet above the rocks below where she lay 'quite still' until rescued unharmed by the fire service (*Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* 1899). Local and national papers praised her 'remarkable escape from death' and 'wonderful presence of mind' (*Durham County Advertiser, Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 1899). Not all injuries were the result of a fall, in July 1901 Mrs Cooper of Macclesfield was sat relaxing under Lover's Leap when she was hit by a boulder falling from the cliff above resulting in a broken leg and back injuries (*The Bradford Daily Telegraph* 1901). In August 1900 Frank Downs was

discovered badly injured at the bottom of the cliff having apparently rolled over the day before whilst asleep (*The Manchester Courier* 1900) while in 1904 a young boy named Charles Shipley from nearby Byron Street was left in a 'precarious' condition after falling down the cliff while out playing with friends (*The Staffordshire Sentinel* 1904). This fate befell so many over the years that one might have expected their misfortune to have been blamed on a curse or haunting linked to the site however this doesn't seem to have appealed to the pragmatic inhabitants of Buxton who missed this opportunity for further publicity.

One of the strangest deaths associated with Lover's Leap was that of the unknown man with a 'clipped moustache' and 'stout boots' who was discovered by George Heathcote, a solicitor from Manchester, during an early morning walk on Sunday 11 June 1911. Mr Heathcoat found the man lying unconscious at the bottom of the crevice with his head on a projecting rock and blood splattered all around (*Halifax Evening Courier* 1911). The man was removed to the Devonshire hospital with a fractured skull and died shortly afterwards. The mystery deepened when a plate layer working nearby explained that on the Saturday evening when he had given him some tobacco, the man had looked 'strange in his ways' and confided that 'they are after me, and the sooner they cop me the better; it will ease my mind' (*The Manchester Guardian* 1911). On Sunday 24 April 1938 a pillion rider miraculously escaped death when both he and the bike he was on were flung over the cliffs narrowly missing four tourists in the chasm below (*The Manchester Guardian* 1938) and similar stories of people falling from Lover's Leap continue to be reported until the late 1950s. On Saturday 12 May 1951 Five-year-old Christopher Luff from nearby Byron Street had perhaps the luckiest escape of all when he ran ahead of his parents in search of a picnic spot and fell 70 feet from the top of the Lover's Leap. He landed in the stream below and was pulled to safety by some walkers from Nottingham surviving with only minor bruising. Nevertheless, he was 'put to bed for a week in case of any possible aftereffects' (*Buxton Advertiser and Herald* 1951).

Decline and Disuse

Tourism in Buxton took many years to recover from the second world war during which time the majority of its hotels were requisitioned by the state. The post war day trippers who began to return to the town by train, bus and increasingly car, still explored the town centre and the Crescent; took a walk in the Pavilion Gardens; and visited the Winter Gardens and Opera House. Those looking for a bracing walk could wander through Corbar Woods to the North or climb the paths through Grin Low woods to Solomon's temple to the South. Poole's Cavern, a little way out of town, remained accessible on foot via a pleasant walk through the Serpentine Gardens and provided a car park for those visiting by tourist bus or car. In contrast, however, Lover's Leap become increasingly isolated. The A6 developed into a major route between Derby and Manchester and road traffic along Ashwood Dale dramatically increased with a constant stream of heavy lorries from nearby quarries. Without space for parking on either the turnpike below or the Duke's Drive above and without a footpath along the busy A6, the site became hard to access safely by either car or foot. At the same time the draw of the sublime became less important to visitors and Lover's Leap slowly fell off tourist itineraries and into disuse.

The site continued in the ownership of the Duke of Devonshire until the death of the 10th Duke in 1950 when death duties of 80% forced the sale of many artworks and estate lands including Lover's Leap, Sherbrook Dell, and Poole's Cavern. No buyer was found for many lots including these two tourist sites which were ultimately handed over to the care of Buxton Civic Association (*Manchester Guardian* 1954) who, whilst promoting and developing Poole's Cavern and Grin Low woods over the intervening years, have largely ignored Lover's Leap aside from occasionally removing the rubbish that finds its way into the gorge (Buxton Civic Association 2016). The legend itself however has survived, in the literature if not in local consciousness, appearing in varying versions in collections of Derbyshire folktales (see for example Bell 1993, Castle 2010 and Henderson, 2011).



Figure 17: Inside Sherbrook Dell, © Andrew Robinson 2022

Today, whilst Poole's Cavern remains as a tourist destination, Lover's Leap, Buxton's own picturesque slice of the uncanny sublime, is overgrown, largely forgotten and both difficult and dangerous to access. It is easy to drive along either the A6 or Duke's Drive without ever knowing Shirebrook Dell exists, even in winter, when the vegetation is thin and the cliffs and gorge are exposed, it is easy to miss. Visiting the dell today you are likely to be alone aside from the occasional climber or intrepid photographer. Nevertheless if one carefully navigates the traffic along the A6 to arrive at the entrance, the towering cliffs above and the narrow gorge below still impress. If you were to walk along the summer stream or navigate the swirling winter torrent between the cliffs and enter the inner gorge, the lichen and fern covered cliff faces framed by overhanging trees and accompanied by the noise of swirling water tumbling over the waterfall at its distant rocky end, can still conjure a sense of the sublime.

Conclusion

Lover's Leap and Sherbrooke Dell, with its towering precipice, mossy tree lined cliffs and bubbling stream, and its uncanny sense of claustrophobia and isolation from the world within, provided a highly regarded slice of the sublime on the edge of the town of Buxton in a landscape which was otherwise considered 'barren' and 'inhospitable' by travel writers. The development of the town from hamlet into regional town and important tourist destination under the patronage of the 5th and 6th Dukes of Devonshire was largely driven by the healing properties of its waters and the town's proximity to the Wonders of the Peak. Nevertheless, the extent to which the surrounding landscape could satisfy the expectations of the picturesque tourist of the late 18th and 19th century was a key factor in both attracting and pleasing visitors, and Lover's Leap can be seen to have played an important role in satisfying this.



Figure 18: *The Cliff, Lover's Leap*, © Andrew Robinson 2022

The site's location was identified in guides and on maps through its association with the legend of lovers leaping to safety in order to wed and was promoted through evocative

descriptions of its sublime beauty and uncanny atmosphere in numerous guides and publications alongside its visual representation in lithographs, photographs, picture postcards, railway posters and a wide range of collectables for the visiting tourist. The importance of the site to the tourist itinerary of Buxton is demonstrated by the 5th Duke's construction of the New Carriage Ride with Lover's Leap as its destination along with the planting and land management of Ashwood Dale and the surrounding countryside. Whilst the name Lover's Leap was established prior to 1775 the legend which gave name to the gorge varies from telling to telling with the earliest version now most often linked to the site only appearing in 1864. Although no documentation exists, this tale of eloping lovers leaping the chasm to be married against the wishes of their parents is entirely plausible given the proximity of Peak Forest Chapel and changes to the morphology of Sherbrooke Dell over the intervening years. If the legend itself was subsequently overlooked by both tourist guides and visual representations of the site, the name it gave rise to played an important role in providing a romantic identifier for this notable beauty spot.

Here then we see a complex interplay of legend, landscape, tourism and the sublime across more than 230 years. A local legend gave name to a site which came to play an important role in both helping to establish Buxton as a tourist destination providing a strange, natural beauty spot within easy access of the town. As access improved and nearby industrial extraction developed the site became increasingly isolated whilst at the same time the needs and desire of tourists changed. If the site itself has now largely been forgotten, the legend lives on through retellings in collections of Derbyshire folklore, the tales of local storytellers and the wealth of visual material culture still to be found in antiques shops, museums and on online auction sites.

Potential exists for further research into UK sites known as Lover's Leap in order to build a fuller picture of their origins, development, and role along with associated folklore, legend, and material culture. With regards to the Buxton site, research regarding the origin of both the site name and the legend associated with it may reveal interesting information, while it is hoped continued work in the Chatsworth Archive will reveal insight into the 5th

Duke's intentions for the site and his New Ride. No drawings or diagrams have been discovered that predate the blasting linked to the building of the turnpike that removed rocks at the entrance to the gorge and should a detailed map or sketch exist it could help clarify the feasibility of the legendary leap. It is likely that older residents will still remember visiting the site in the 1940s and 50s before it became overgrown, and interviews may be able to collect interesting memories regarding the site's standing and status in its later years as an attraction.

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