

**History
Of
Bishopton Spa**

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Bishopton Spa

The two attractive Victorian buildings, sited rather incongruously alongside the Stratford canal at Bishopton, are as isolated now as when they were built, nearly one hundred and forty years ago. Yet this was not the intention of the men who built them : they had hoped to develop around this site a fashionable inland resort, using the mineral springs of Bishopton as an initial attraction. This attempted spa development is certainly not unknown, but hitherto the story has only been very briefly touched upon [Ref1](#).

By concentrating on the spa buildings themselves, the full implications of the scheme have been overlooked, especially the attempt to transform the fields of Bishopton into a middle class residential area. Also, no satisfactory explanation has yet been given for the collapse of the scheme. It is too easy to say that, as a spa, Bishopton was late in the field, for it was to be shown at Droitwich in the 1880s that a spa could be successfully developed at a much later date. Recent work on Leamington [Ref2](#) has shown that the success of a similar venture there owed something to luck. but much more to the enter-prise of those behind the scheme, who had the means (and nerve) to invest very large sums of money. It is this aspect of the attempted spa development at Bishopton which has received virtually no attention, and it is the purpose of this article to examine in some detail the background to the scheme, and, by so doing, to provide an explanation for its failure.

The spa was opened on 24 May 1837 as part of the celebrations to commemorate the eighteenth birthday of Princess Victoria, but the Bishopton waters had been held in repute, at least locally, for some time. The springs were first brought to the public's notice by Dr. Charles Perry, who, in 1744, published 'An Account of an Analysis made on the Stratford Mineral Water', from which we learn that the spring had been discovered some years previously but 'that it had not been resorted to, nor its virtues scarcely thought of 'till within fifteen months past'. Perry is principally remembered today for the accounts of his travels abroad, but during his lifetime he enjoyed something of a reputation as an authority on mineral waters, and the fact that his opinion had been sought out (by a gentleman whom he does not name) indicates that there was some thought of developing a spa at this date. In fact, Perry states that 'the place will in a little time (as it may with a small expense to the corporation of Stratford) be rendered not only commodious but delightful' and another analysis, made in the following year by James MacKenzie, a prominent Worcester physician, ends with advice to the gentlemen of Stratford, that, if 'they wish to bring their waters into reputation' to seek the opinion of Dr. Shaw 'the best chemist in England' [Ref3](#). However, no real action was taken, although we do know that rudimentary buildings were erected to cater for visitors. We owe our knowledge of these to drawings by Rev. Joseph Greene [Ref4](#), vicar of Weston on Avon and headmaster of the Stratford Grammar School, whose interests had evidently been aroused by the discovery of the spring. His own copy of Perry's 'Analysis' survives [Ref5](#), with marginal notes in his hand, and the only record of MacKenzie's analysis is Greene's transcript of it. Greene also possessed a copy of another tract published at the time, a spirited rejoinder to Perry's analysis by an Evesham apothecary, William Baylies, then only 21, who criticised every one of the former's experiments. It is probably either to Joseph Greene or Edward Kenwrick, vicar of Stratford from 1736 to 1762 (who was later credited with the discovery of the spring) that Baylies refers when he comments sarcastically on Perry's style: 'As to the inaccuracies of stile which are to be met with in almost every page of the Doctor's book, they are excusable in a gentleman who by living so long in foreign countries may have forgot the strength and beauty of our language, and there-fore I shall take no further notice of them than to observe that in this country he might easily have got some learned and good-natured clergyman to have reviewed his manuscript' [Ref6](#). It was not until the late 1820s that any further development of the mineral spring took place. It is mentioned in about 1800 by John Jordan who

informed his readers that 'it is much visited by those in the neighbourhood who have unhappily occasion to apply to it from being afflicted with disorders and they find great relief from it'^{Ref7}. But the man who made the first attempt to develop a spa was one William Atkins, who had already erected a building on the site by 1831. But once the initiative had been taken men wealthier than Atkins became interested : a syndicate of four Stratford gentlemen was formed, who bought Atkins out in 1834^{Ref8}, demolished his building and began to erect a modern pump room, baths and hotel. The four men present an interesting combination. The most eminent was John Branston Freer^{Ref9}, the only son of John Freer of Weston House in Rutland: he was born in 1797 and succeeded his father in 1816. By this time most of the family estates had been sold off, and John Branston Freer inherited a much depleted fortune, partly caused, apparently, by his father's three imprudent marriages. He therefore moved to Stratford in the 1820s, taking up residence first in Payton Street, and then, in 1834, in a large house on the corner of Chestnut Walk and Church Street, in the traditionally fashionable area of the town. As was to be expected of a man of his social standing, he played an influential part in local affairs. He was a Justice of the Peace from 1830, a Deputy Lieutenant of the county from 1833, and mayor of Stratford in 1844 and 1858-59. His business activities included directorships of the Stratford-upon-Avon Railway and the Stourbridge and Kidderminster Banking Company^{Ref10}.

Freer died in 1873, the same year as William Oakes Hunt, one of his^{Ref11} Hunt was a member of an old colleagues in the Victoria Spa Company. and influential legal family. His father, Thomas Hunt, had been Clerk of the County from 1802 to 1819, and town clerk of Stratford from 1792 to 1818. William succeeded to both these positions, as well as carrying on a lucrative solicitor's practice in the town, in partnership with his brother, Henry Oliver Hunt. The Hunt brothers dominated Stratford's legal affairs in the nineteenth century; •apart from the town clerkship, William and Henry were clerks to several turnpike trusts, to the Bridge Commissioners and to the Canal Company.

The two other members of the consortium were Edmund Darby Ford and William Burman. Ford was born at Madeley in Shropshire, in 1793, and was evidently a descendant of the marriage, in the early 18th century, of Richard Ford (later the manager of the Coalbrookdale ironworks in Madeley) to the owner's daughter, Mary Darby^{Ref12}. Edmund Darby Ford moved to Stratford in about 1833, to become the junior partner in the banking firm of Oldaker, Tomes and Chattaway. In January 1838, this concern was absorbed by the Stourbridge and Kidderminster Banking Company, but Ford remained as manager until his death in December 1857. The consortium no doubt hoped he would provide financial backing in the early stages of the development, an expectation which the take-over of his bank four years later no doubt seriously undermined. William Burman, born in 1785, was the third son of Richard Burman of Botley^{Ref13}. He moved to Stratford and established himself as a tradesman of some virtuosity, being described in 1830 as a chemist, druggist, grocer, tea-dealer and maltster. Obviously a man of considerable business acumen, his interests later expanded to include a factory for the manufacture of bricks and tiles which he set up in the Birmingham Road. Like Freer, he was also an active member of the Stratford Corporation, holding the office of mayor in 1819 and 1833. He died in 1856.

These, then, were the four men who, in 1834, formed a company to develop the Bishopton Spa. In retrospect it is easy to forget that at the time much was in their favour. The first stirrings of the Shakespeare industry were no doubt very much in the minds of the promoters. The first Shakespeare celebrations since 1769 had been held in 1827 and 1830, and from the 1820s, the pilgrimage to Stratford became an increasingly popular item on the fashionable itinerary. The opening of the new spa buildings was also carefully planned. An essential pre-requisite was a

favourable analysis of the waters, and for this purpose the promoters secured the services of John Daniell, Professor of Chemistry at King's College, London^{Ref14}. Daniell was a very eminent man in his day, and to have his name linked with the project was excellent publicity. But, more astute, was the timing of the opening, planned to coincide with the eighteenth birthday of the Princess Victoria, who was graciously pleased to allow the spa to be named after her^{Ref15}. Celebrations to commemorate her birthday were consequently held at the Spa, amidst, as the Warwick Advertiser informs us, scenes of great gaiety and enthusiasm^{Ref16}. A preposterous ode was composed to mark the occasion, and the report of the opening in the Warwick Advertiser reflects the atmosphere of characteristic euphoria which surrounded most ventures of this kind at the beginning of the Victorian epoch : 'None of the proprietors could have the slightest idea of the complete success of the undertaking. The harmony which prevailed, the beauty of the scene, and the fineness of the weather, contributed to inspire everyone with feelings of unrestrained gaiety; and if we may judge the ultimate success and eminence of the Victoria Spa, by this flattering opening, we can have no hesitation in stating that it will soon recompense those proprietors, in whom, with such spirit and effect, it originated; and the residents of Stratford will recollect, with grateful pleasure, the exertions of those townspeople who, at great expense and risk, have done so much for the prosperity and welfare of the place'.

An atmosphere of optimism still prevailed when A. B. Granville visited the Spa in October 1839. With regard to the hotel he remarked: surveyed every part of it with some surprise that so much luxury and convenience, such as would satisfy the most fastidious 'richard' should have been brought together under one roof is so retired a place'. As to the pump room and baths 'the internal accommodation deserves as much praise as its external prettiness. As an establishment of this class, this size, there is not any one of the baths at Leamington to be compared with it A remarkable degree of liberality ... is observable throughout the suite of apartments. The furniture is not only plentiful but of the best materials; and there is every contrivance, particularly in the ladies' department, even down to the tiniest slippers, lined with soft fur'^{Ref17}.

Amongst these favourable comments, however, can be detected elements which were eventually to prove the Spa's undoing. Granville was very critical of the social life which attended the fashionable resorts and it was their conspicuous absence at Bishopton which so attracted him. No spa, however, could survive by its medicinal virtues alone, and, although the Warwick Advertiser, commenting on Bishopton's geographical location between Cheltenham and Leamington, expressed the opinion that 'it will no doubt in a few years attract such a train of visitors as will render it of equal importance with either of these places'^{Ref18}, the only social attraction they were able to mention were the Warwickshire Hounds at Shottery. No one was more aware of this problem than the promoters themselves : Granville, in fact, 'met opportunely' W. O. Hunt, one of the consortium, at the Spa, who pointed out to him land nearby on which it was hoped to develop fashionable residential housing, and auctioneers were already drawing attention to the substantial profits which could be made from the purchase of possible building land in the area. Such a scheme, however, required very sound financial backing, and, as the venture at Bishopton proceeded, we can detect a gradual loss of nerve with the realisation that there were to be no quick returns on the investment.

The first step was to buy land; Freer had already purchased a farm at Bishopton in 1832, and in 1841 he paid £9, 900 for a very extensive estate, known as Bishopton Manor, extending for some distance to the north and east of the Spa. Out of this, he sold four large fields to one of his fellow promoters, William Burman^{Ref19}. The other two members of the consortium, Ford and Hunt, had also been busy: in June 1841 they had purchased a farm to the south of the Spa^{Ref20}. At this point, John Rich, a prominent Bearley landowner, joined the scheme, putting up a third share of the money

required to purchase the farm. The diagram on page 26 illustrates the remarkable state of affairs just before the building programme was launched and is a reminder of how the whole area might have been transformed had the venture succeeded.

The developers decided to begin operations on the farm purchased jointly by Hunt, Ford and Rich. To this purpose a road, Victoria Terrace, was laid out linking Bishopton Lane and the Birmingham Road, thus reducing the distance from Stratford to the Spa by half a mile. A lodge was built at each end and the land fronting the new road divided up into building plots. By no means the whole of the farm was to be disposed of at once. The speculators hoped that the land would rise in value as the project proceeded and therefore only intended to release it gradually. As an incentive for the first purchasers, it was arranged that a new church be built on one of the building plots. The original chapel at Bishopton, situated near the old manor house, had long since fallen into disrepair, and had not been used since the beginning of the century. There had been talk of rebuilding since 1826, but now the developers decided to expedite matters. They were able to supply a site free of charge, and a subscription fund for the new building was launched, to which they were the principal contributors^{Ref21}. The building was completed during the autumn and winter months of 1843 and everything seemed ready when in May 1844 it was announced that thirteen valuable building plots in Victoria Terrace and Bishopton Lane were available for purchase by private treaty^{Ref22}.

It is quite clear, however, even at this early stage, that things were beginning to go wrong. From the outset the whole scheme was hampered by a lack of capital. The spa buildings themselves were small by contemporary standards and the architects employed of very moderate status^{Ref23}. The four promoters of the scheme, though wealthy in the context of a small market town, were not landed gentry and could offer very little as security to raise capital. This capital was required at the very outset, for Freer found it necessary to mortgage his Church Street house in 1836 to raise £1,500, doubt-less for the expenses of the spa buildings^{Ref24}. The opening of the spa itself, however, brought no relief, and in 1844 he found it necessary to raise a further £5, 000 by mortgaging his whole Bishopton estate^{Ref25}. But the clearest indication of impending trouble was Hunt's desertion of the scheme as early as September 1842. It was comparatively easy to make money in the legal profession, and he therefore saw no reason to take unnecessary risks; and, although singled out by Granville as the man most concerned in the enterprise, it is evident that he soon lost hope of making a quick profit. He therefore backed out by selling to Thomas Ashwin his share in the farm^{Ref26}. Ashwin very much resembled Burman in the variety of his business interests. He had evidently had success in running a carrier service from a wharf by the canal, where he dealt in all manner of goods arriving in the town. Like many Victorian tradesmen and dealers, he now sought to make further gains by investing his profits in land purchase.

Hunt did not entirely desert the scheme, for he later bought two of the building plots in Victoria Terrace. This, however, appears to have been little more than a gesture, for he had no intention of building houses until he was sure the development as a whole would succeed. Though prudent, this was no help to the developers, and it is possible that if Hunt had begun building operations, others would have followed suit. But Hunt's two plots stayed vacant and were sold as such in 1855^{Ref27}.

Hunt's pessimism was, in fact, justified, for the promoters sold none of the building plots advertised in 1844, except, as we have seen, those bought by Hunt. They therefore cast around for other expedients. One of these was the building lease which to a prospective builder was less risky than buying the plot outright. Even so, the only people to come forward were Freer and Burman, two men already involved in the spa project. Unlike Hunt, Burman had already contributed something by building on his land the first house in the proposed development area (Bishopton Lodge)^{Ref28}, and,

with Freer, he now bore the cost of erecting the first house in Victoria Terrace (Linden House)^{Ref29} in the hope that others would follow suit. This scheme, however, was as unsuccessful as the first, and the total lack of appeal which Bishopton had for would-be residents is demonstrated by the failure to find even a disinterested tenant for the new house. Ford (the joint-owner of the land) eventually took up residence and, not surprisingly, an effort to sell the house in June 1849 failed^{Ref30}.

It was at this point that Ralph Potts appeared on the scene. Potts was a retired East India merchant and evidently had a good deal of money at his disposal. In March 1851 he bought Linden House, together with a large tract of land which had once comprised several building plots. In the following year the developers sold to him a similar area of land on the other side of Victoria Terrace, and in 1855 he bought from Hunt his two vacant building plots^{Ref31}. It is clear that Potts, who took up residence in Linden House, never intended to build on any of the vacant land which he had acquired; on the contrary, he wished his residence to be surrounded by a small landed estate, and these events of 1851-2, when what had originally comprised over a dozen building plots was sold to one man, clearly indicate that the developers had abandoned their original plan.

Two further attempts were made, in 1852 and 1855, to sell the residue of the farm, but the sale particulars reflect the gradual decline in the developers' hopes that the land could be sold as building plots. In 1852, for instance, the land was divided into eight lots, but in 1855 into only three^{Ref32}. At the first auction none of the bidding reached the reserved prices, but in the final sale, almost the whole estate was sold off as agricultural land to a neighbouring farmer, with the exception of two building plots. One was bought by C. T. Warde, the owner of nearby Clopton House (who did not, however, proceed to build a house) and the other by Charles Ford, a retired industrialist from Staffordshire, who built on it a residence for himself, now known as Bishopton House^{Ref33}.

By 1855, then, the developers had disposed of the entire farm ear-marked for the first phase of building, but instead of fashionable suburb, only four houses had been built, and, of these, two (Linden House and Bishopton Lodge) had been built by Freer and Burman. The other two (The Limes^{Ref34} and Bishopton House) had been built by Diana Salmon and Charles Ford, both of whom were later to become involved in the fortunes of the Spa. Virtually no one, therefore, without vested interests had been prepared to risk money in building operations.

The fortunes of the Spa itself had followed a downward course almost from the beginning, and this was no doubt the reason both for Hunt's withdrawal from the enterprise and the failure to attract builders to the area. In January 1847, when the baths were let to Diana Salmon (who built The Limes), special provisions were included should it be decided to close down the hotel^{Ref35}. This happened shortly afterwards and the hotel converted into villas, advertised as suitable for accommodating visitors to the Spa. This plan was also unsuccessful and the building stood empty for long periods. In 1854 the Spa was pronounced a failure in Kelly's Directory and this is reflected in the deteriorating financial position in which Freer found himself. He first resorted to mortgaging most of his property, and then to selling off his orchard near Church Street as building plots^{Ref36}. In 1863 he sold off nearly all his Bishopton property, and in 1871 even disposed of his Church Street house^{Ref37}.

There was one piece of property, however, which he was unable to sell, the spa buildings themselves. No buyers came forward in 1862^{Ref38}, and it was only in 1868 that Charles Ford (who built Bishopton House) ventured to buy the property^{Ref39}. Ford, like Potts, was evidently a wealthy man, and made a real attempt to get the Spa on its feet. He was reputed to have spent £3, 000 on

refurbishing the buildings and the Spa was officially re-opened in October 1868. The newspaper struck a rather melancholy note, reminiscing on the earlier opening of 1837 and 'contemplating with the mind's eye the images of those friends then present who had since gone to that bourne from whence no traveller returns'^{Ref40}. Nevertheless, cautious optimism was expressed that Ford might 'realise the interest upon the outlay', and he later arranged to have Perry's 'Analysis' reprinted as one means of attracting visitors. He was as unsuccessful as Freer, however, and on his death in 1877 the property passed to his son-in-law, George Wells. Wells immediately ran into difficulties when he tried to capitalise on his inheritance. The Spa was put up for auction ^{Ref41}, and, in the words of the Stratford Herald the auctioneer 'stated that the late owner Mr. Ford, only a few years ago, spent £3, 000 on the property, which was now a most valuable one, and having regard to the brilliant future of Stratford, would be sure to prove a very profitable investment. The lot was put in at £15, 000 and there being no advance upon £2, 000 this lot was withdrawn'^{Ref42}. No more suitable epitaph can perhaps be found.

Several reasons for the failure of the Spa have already been touched upon, but Ford's attempt to revive the project as late as 1870 is sufficient reminder that, to contemporaries at least, spas were by no means finished^{Ref43}. Their great rival, the coastal resorts, were certainly not preferred by the ordinary pleasure seeker as early as 1840. On the other hand, the tide was about to turn; even at neighbouring Leamington, developed some twenty years earlier, all had not gone smoothly, and it required capital, nerve and luck if the venture at Bishopton was going to succeed. As far as the third of these elements is concerned, it was perhaps unfortunate that the springs were sited some distance from Stratford. At Leamington, a similar situation appears to have favoured the developers, enabling them to operate freely. But, by 1837, the railways had begun to alter the situation; the fashionable resorts were now accessible by rail, which not only made them attractive to visitors, but, as in the case of Leamington and Harrogate, eventually transformed them into fashionable villa towns for commuters from industrial centres. But Stratford still remained off the beaten track. The first railway reached the town in 1859, and it was only in the following year that a link was provided to the industrial north. The developers at Bishopton were certainly aware of this problem. The layout of Victoria Terrace was designed to reduce the distance from Stratford to the Spa by about half a mile, and Ashwin, one of the developers, sponsored a special 'Victoria Spa Coach' to link with the railways at Birmingham^{Ref44}. But it was nerve and capital which the developers really lacked, Hunt typifies the first of these elements, backing out of the scheme at the first sign of trouble. Freer represents the lack of capital; although, as we have seen, he was forced in the end to mortgage all his property, the sums raised were nothing compared to the resources which the landed gentry had in reserve. Coupled with this lack of resources was lack of any real experience in property development. The motley consortium, a gentleman whose family had fallen on hard times, a lawyer, a bank manager and a tradesman, were ambitiously trying to emulate property development elsewhere, no doubt spurred on by the example of neighbouring Leamington. Consequently, the whole scheme was dogged by a sense of uncertainty, as the speculators endeavoured to invest as little as they could for biggest return. If, instead of trying to sell building plots at inflated prices, they had taken a positive initiative in the building operations, others might have been tempted to follow suit; and had the housing development succeeded, the Spa itself may well have survived. But because the Spa was not an immediate success, the land speculators faltered and both projects floundered.

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References

- Ref1** For instance, it is not mentioned at all in the two standard histories of Stratford, viz. P. Styles in vol. III of *The Victoria County History of Warwick* (1945); L. Fox, *Borough Town of Stratford-upon-Avon* (1953). For more recent work, see R. Chaplin in *The Local Historian* (vol. 10, no. 4). F. C. Wellstood made a detailed study of the early history of the spa, a summary of which appeared in *The Stratford Herald*, 11 April 1919.
- Ref2** R. Chaplin, in *Warwickshire History*, vol. 2, no. 2.
- Ref3** Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Records Office, ER 1/2/8. All other manuscript references are to the same office.
- Ref4** ER 1/113
- Ref5** At the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.
- Ref6** This was not the first time Baylies was to clash with accepted medical authorities. In 1757 he ruined his fairly successful practice in Bath by quarrelling with the two chief doctors there, Lucas and Oliver, in a pamphlet, *Reflections on the Use and Abuse of Bath Waters*. Forced to leave Bath, his lavish style of living led to financial difficulties, and he left England to become physician to Frederick the Great at Berlin (*Dictionary of National Biography*)
- Ref7** ER 1/17, f. 79
- Ref8** ER 3/1627
- Ref9** His obituary in *The Stratford Herald*, 8 March 1873, is a useful source. See also Burke's *Landed Gentry*, 1855, p.415.
- Ref10** For details, see ER 21/38
- Ref11** For his obituary, see *The Stratford Herald*, 21 March 1873. The official careers of the Hunt family are neatly summarised by Sir Edgar Stephens in *Clerks of the Counties* (1961), p. 174.
- Ref12** A. Raistrick, *Dynasty of Iron Founders*, 1953. There were three sons of this Quaker marriage, Richard, Edmund and Abraham, the two former being declared bankrupt in 1764. Any of these could have been Edmund Darby Ford's grandfather, but the family's genealogy is far from clear. Although the census returns record E. D. Ford's birth in Madeley, there is no record of this in the parish baptism register, or the Quaker birth register.
- Ref13** *The Burman Family of Warwickshire* (1916), by John Burman, p. 33. 14. ER 1/28, f.45. For Daniell, see *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol.
- Ref14** p. 33.
- Ref15** The letter from her mother, the Duchess of Kent, authorising this, is printed in *The Stratford Herald*, 16 October 1868.
- Ref16** *Warwick Advertiser*, 27 May 1837.
- Ref17** A. B. Granville, *Spas of England* (1841), vol. 2, pp. 272-3
- Ref18** *Warwick Advertiser*, loc. cit.
- Ref19** ER 3/950, 952, 1260
- Ref20** ER 3/1030, 3511
- Ref21** ER 3/1462; ER 11/29/1-31

- Ref22 ER 6/120/3
- Ref23 The pumphouse was designed by a Mr. Hamilton of Stratford-upon-Avon who is otherwise unknown. The hotel was the work of S. W. Daukes (or Dawkes) of Gloucester, 1811-1880, who did other work at Cheltenham, Horsted Place in Sussex and Colney Hatch hospital in Middlesex. I am indebted to Mr. Geoffrey Tyack for this information.
- Ref24 ER 3/1243
- Ref25 ER 3/949-950
- Ref26 ER 3/1050, 3511
- Ref27 ER 3/1050, 3552
- Ref28 It is shown on 1844 sale particulars: ER 6/120/3
- Ref29 ER 3/1020
- Ref30 ER 6/120/6
- Ref31 ER 3/3518, 3530-32, 3552
- Ref32 ER 6/120/8-10
- Ref33 ER 3/3557-8
- Ref34 This house had been built on a plot of land fronting the Birmingham Road, and was, in fact, outside the area of the planned development: ER 3/1067
- Ref35 ER 3/1250
- Ref36 These plots comprised roughly what is now Broad Street and West Street. The first plots were sold in 1849, but the process continued at an increasing rate until about 1867.
- Ref37 ER 3/3626, 3728
- Ref38 ER 6/120/11
- Ref39 ER 3/3689
- Ref40 The Stratford Herald, 16, October 1868
- Ref41 ER 3/120/17
- Ref42 The Stratford Herald, 22 November 1878
- Ref43 There was even talk of piping the water to a kiosk in Stratford as late as 1919; The Stratford Herald, 28 March 1919
- Ref44 ER 1/30, f.179.