

Elgar at Lower Broadheath

As Victorian architects go, John Chessell Buckler had quite an impressive portfolio to his name. He built a gothic fantasy castle for Lord Stafford, finished runner-up to Charles Barry in the competition to rebuild the Houses of Parliament, and restored a whole host of medieval churches in and around Oxfordshire.

And when he wasn't redesigning the buildings of Oxford, he was sketching them. Like his father, Buckler was an accomplished draughtsman and artist, filling countless sketchbooks with precise views of cathedrals and churches, chapels and grammar schools.

In the mid-1850s Buckler's chief occupation appears to have been the restoration of the Turl Street façade of Jesus College, though it's unlikely that this took up his every waking minute. Now in his sixtieth year, Mr Buckler was beginning to wind down, and to embrace what turned out to be a generous forty years of retirement.

Given his background, I have no idea what brought John Chessell Buckler to the little Worcestershire hamlet of Lower Broadheath in the summer of 1856. If he was on the look-out for significant architecture, he was in the wrong place; Worcester was some three miles away.

Nonetheless, Buckler left behind a memento of that brief sojourn in the shape of a small circular watercolour of one of the cottages in the village. The view shows the garden of the house, along with its outbuildings, and, at the bottom of the path, a family group - mother and father and young daughter - seemingly posed for the artist. There are other figures in the garden too, but too indistinct for closer identification.

Buckler's picture of Broadheath is not one we should press too hard for accuracy; the grand fountain in the middle of the lawn is almost certainly an invention. This would have been a ridiculous affectation in such a modest country cottage.

So there we are. We could label the picture: JC Buckler, 1856, watercolour of Lower Broadheath with Mr and Mrs... Mr and Mrs who, exactly ?

And that is where a piece of purely antiquarian topography becomes something rather more intriguing, for the couple in the picture are none other than William and Anne Elgar, the parents of Britain's greatest composer.

Had Buckler waited another year or so to make his visit to Broadheath, he might have painted the young Edward himself. Elgar was born in this very cottage in June 1857.

Equally, and only two more years after that, the Elgars had decamped from their rural haven back into the centre of Worcester. Buckler's was a narrow window of opportunity.

How to explain all this ? We can rule out the possibility that Mr Buckler's had powers of precognition to match his undoubted draughtsmanship. Neither the painter nor the occupants had any inkling that this cottage was shortly to be the birthplace and later the shrine to our best-loved composer, and one day a museum in his memory. More likely there was some connection between John Chessell Buckler and William Henry Elgar, the composer's father.

As a professional piano-tuner, William Elgar had strong links with the musical life of the city of Worcester, much of which revolved around the cathedral. Buckler's architectural work likewise took him into the diocese, and sketches by him of the

cathedral certainly survive. Perhaps the two men met in this way, and the result was an invitation out to Lower Broadheath, a call repaid with this little picture. Who knows? We might be tempted to call it an enigma.

The Elgars were clearly rather proud of their country retreat, moving there in 1856 when there were already three children in their family. That might explain their prominent position in the picture, monarchs of their little green world. But by 1859 the impracticalities of living in Broadheath and working in Worcester had dawned on William, and he took the family back to Edgar Street, close to the centre of his operations.

John Buckler's watercolour now hangs on the landing of the Elgar museum at Lower Broadheath, and it served as a very useful model, when Elgar's daughter, Carice, was reconstructing the cottage and garden prior to opening them to the public back in the 1930s.

During his lifetime Edward Elgar lived in a dozen different houses in Worcestershire (and many more beyond the county), from the modest and humble to the decidedly grand. Yet it is this house in Broadheath, where the composer spent no more than the first two years or so of his life, that Elgar himself, and we, value the most. And it was the birthplace which was chosen, after the composer's death in 1934, to tell his story. It's hard to think of an English museum in more charming a spot.

Today the Elgar Birthplace and Visitor Centre consists of two elements. The cottage itself acts as a kind of composite of all of Elgar's houses rolled together, with artefacts and souvenirs and examples of Edward's scientific equipment and self-made musical instruments.

The modern visitor centre tells the story of Elgar's life and achievements, with musical scores, including (in pride of place) the precious manuscript copy of the Second Symphony.

No reason at all for John Chessell Buckler to guess any of this. Call it a case of being in the right place at the right time.