

## TO CHADDESSEN BY BALLOON

Long ago, back in the 1850s, one of the highlights of the summer entertainment calendar for the people of Derby and district was the Arboretum Anniversary Festival, generally held around mid to late June each year. The Arboretum was a popular spot for local residents to go for a pleasant walk around its beautifully laid-out gardens, pictured here in a postcard dating from around 1905.



On Monday 22 June 1857, encouraged by the prospect of unusually good weather for that year's Festival, crowds of visitors began to arrive in the town by road or rail around mid-day, with special trains laid on to transport people into Derby from places such as Birmingham, Leicester, Sheffield and Nottingham.

A General Holiday had been declared for Derby, so shopkeepers closed their premises promptly at 1:00 p.m. and just half an hour later the five bands that had previously assembled in the Market Place departed for the Arboretum, taking hordes of people with them. To make certain there were no queues when the visitors reached their destination, posters warned that no admittance money would be taken at the Arboretum, and that tickets (Adults 6d; Children under twelve years 3d) must be purchased in advance from one of the many local retailers in town. This was undoubtedly a sensible precaution since the numbers present were estimated at around 30,000.

The population of Chaddesden in those days was only in the region of 450 people, but no doubt a good proportion of them made their way to the Arboretum with the express intention of seeing the Festival's main attraction, a balloon ascent by the celebrated aeronaut Mr. Henry Coxwell.<sup>1</sup> Although British balloon flights were first made back in 1784 – in Scotland by James Tytler in Edinburgh on 27 August, and in England by Signor Vincenzo ('Vincent') Lunardi who flew from Moorfields in London to Hertfordshire a few days later on 15 September – they were not common events and many people would have been curious to see this amazing contraption close-up for themselves. As things turned out, however, those Chaddesden residents who journeyed up to the Arboretum on that fine summer's day in 1857 would have seen much more of Mr. Coxwell and his splendid balloon if they had spared themselves the trip into Derby and simply stayed at home.

<sup>1</sup> Coxwell wrote extensively about ballooning and included this visit to the Arboretum in his book, *My Life and Balloon Experiences* (Second Series), London, 1889, pp.30-1.

At the Arboretum, the ever-growing crowds amused themselves by listening to the music of various military bands, or looking at the two large Russian cannons on their carriages taken at the Siege of Sebastopol (1854–5) and recently presented to the Arboretum as trophies of war at the request of Michael Bass, MP for Derby. One of the cannons attracted special attention since, in the words of a newspaper advertisement, it had suffered ‘well directed fire from the English Batteries.’ Thanks to the glorious weather the refreshment stalls did a roaring trade, and soon the heat of the day made it seem as if the Festival ground were populated by a forest of elegant parasols as the ladies shaded themselves from the sun. Later in the afternoon, the fascinated crowd watched as Mr. Coxwell provided a variety of balloon-related amusements, such as a parachute descent, small balloon races, and the gigantic inflated figure of a man twelve feet high which bounced across the field with massive strides.

As the time approached 5:00 pm, most people had moved towards an enclosure sited opposite the Arboretum's entrance-hall, for it was from here that Mr. Coxwell would make his 263rd balloon ascent. A gas supply had been laid on in preparation and, for a payment of 6d, members of the public could actually enter the enclosure and watch the large balloon being inflated. For even braver ladies and gentlemen, partial (tethered) ascents were available at a charge of 2s 6d. Health and Safety concerns did not unduly bother our Victorian predecessors, and suggestions that perhaps the gentlemen should not be smoking their cigars in proximity to the balloon while it was being filled with gas were duly ignored!

Unfortunately it has not proved possible to locate a picture of the scene at Derby, however, an engraving of Coxwell about to make an ascent just two years later at Basford, some three miles to the north-west of Nottingham, can be seen below. Here the venue was a fête in the park attached to Basford Hall, the residence of Mr Thomas North, in aid of the rebuilding of the parish church.<sup>2</sup> Note that the balloon shown here features later on in this article.



Credit: Crowds of people gathered at an entertainment at Basford, including music and a balloon. Coloured wood engraving, 1859. [Wellcome Collection 36380j](#). Licence: [Public Domain Mark](#)

<sup>2</sup> Basford Hall has survived to the present day and is now the Miners' Welfare and Conference Centre on Goldcrest Road. The Wellcome Collection incorrectly attributes the venue to 'Basford, Staffs.'

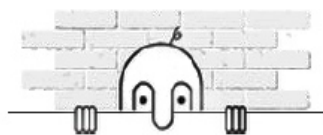
Returning once more to events at Derby Arboretum on that June day in 1857, the balloon was at last ready to ascend. Coxwell and a local man, Mr. William Foster from the Rutland Arms at the corner of Lower Carrington Street and Nelson Street, climbed carefully into the basket, adjusted the sand ballast and the balloon rose steadily into the air, accompanied by the playing of a band and much cheering from the crowd. The gentlest of westerly breezes gradually propelled the balloon and its two-man crew away from the Arboretum and soon the balloonists were able to look straight down into the River Derwent below, and before long the grounds of the new Nottingham Road Cemetery came into view, beyond which lay the green fields and cottages of Chaddesden.

After a total of some forty-five minutes in the air, during which the crowds at the Arboretum were still straining their eyes to see the balloon by now almost two miles distant, Coxwell decided it was time to land and, to the amazement of many local people, the balloon gradually descended, finally coming safely to rest in the parkland adjacent to Chaddesden Hall, the home of Sir Henry Sacheverell Wilmot. Unfortunately Sir Henry was away from Chaddesden that day, but in his absence Mr. James Nuttall, from the neighbouring Hall Farm, helped the two travellers and provided them with refreshments. No doubt those villagers who lived near the Hall availed themselves of this unexpected opportunity to see the balloon for themselves. After staying at Chaddesden for about an hour, Messrs. Coxwell and Foster returned to Derby.

Mr. Coxwell and his balloon proved such a popular attraction that they were invited back to the Arboretum in June 1858. On this occasion the weather was again fine and the balloon ascent began at 5:30 pm. The balloon, a new one which Coxwell had decided to call 'The Queen' (see the illustration above), rose perpendicularly and remained motionless above the town for about half an hour before a light breeze sprang up and the balloon gently drifted once more over the River Derwent before landing – against all the odds – in front of Chaddesden Hall, close by the previous year's touch-down spot!

Henry Coxwell continued his balloon ascents for many more years and in September 1862 was lucky to escape with his life. On that occasion he and James Glaisher ascended to an altitude in excess of 35,000 feet. The two men were in their usual open-basket balloon, had no special protection against the extreme cold and were travelling without the benefit of an oxygen supply. Glaisher eventually became unconscious and Coxwell, his hands too numb from the cold to work the controls, had to pull the gas-release cord with his teeth! Fortunately this manoeuvre worked and as the balloon fell into warmer air, the two men revived and landed safely.

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