The Road to Buxton: Part 2

We sent the video, and waited … and on 1 October Linda heard from Neil Smith, offering Dunfermline G&S Society the opportunity to be a part of the 2026 Festival and to perform "The Jury's Out" at St John's Church, a subsidiary venue, on the afternoon of 5 August. Exciting news, quickly shared with members. Fortunately, Linda, our MD Eddie Maclennan, and enough of the cast were available for us to commit to appear. We then just had to make it happen!

Plan A was to rehearse in St John's on the previous evening and on the morning of the performance, with rehearsals on selected Wednesdays and Sundays after "Strictly Patience". Inevitably some of the première cast were unable to take part, sadly including founder member Robin Ożóg, who had played Sir Marmaduke/Judge. We are most grateful to Ian Lawson from the Edinburgh G&S Society (EDGAS), already going to Buxton as part of their "Iolanthe" cast, for being such a talented and gracious replacement. With Eric Brown "deftly substituted" for Mike Enright as Dr Daly/Foreman, three members recruited for the chorus, and three volunteers pressed into service as stage crew, all was prepared.

St John's is larger than Limekilns Parish Church, our normal rehearsal venue, but is equally not a theatre, with no curtains or scope for cloths and scenery. Modifications were devised to make the staging as effective as possible in a church setting, as for our post-pandemic "Princess Ida". However, the changes were significant, so Plan B involved running the show twice at Limekilns a fortnight before our Buxton appearance, with a single extended rehearsal in St John's. So Robin didn't escape involvement, standing in as Adam/Usher at Limekilns.

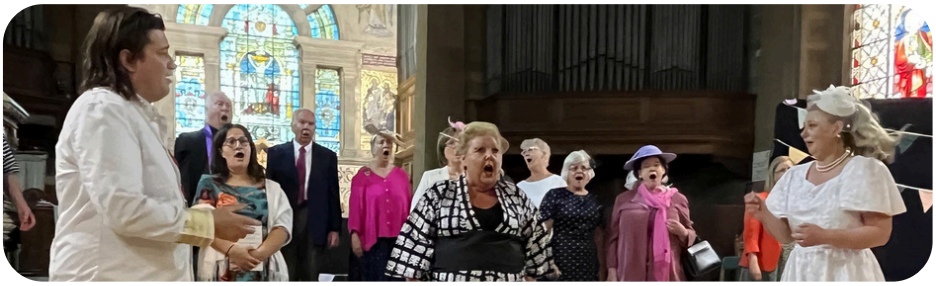
The music for the overture had been cleverly compiled by Willie Campbell for orchestra, but at Buxton we would only have a grand piano, so Willie set about creating a reduction for piano, four hands. Two of those would be his, before he joined the assembled villagers on-stage for Act 1. At Limekilns, the second pair of hands, providing accompaniment for the rest of the show, belonged to Carol Madden, our regular rehearsal pianist; at Buxton, her place was taken by James Hendry, taking a break from conducting the Opera House orchestra. No pressure then!

Not everything went smoothly, and we were sad when one of our younger members, Andrew Murray, had to pull out. Andy had been involved in many of the humorous asides as assistant to Adam and trainee Usher. Plan C … who better to play the fool in his stead than the inimitable Jack Archibald?!

Rehearsals came and went, with variable forces and much need of librettos and scores to refresh the memory traces from sixteen months before. Then two Limekilns shows delighted the audiences and sharpened up our act considerably. Another salient learning point was that rehearsing fully in the performance space isn't always possible, so you have to be fully alert and flexible, and be prepared for things to be a bit manic in places!

Time to head for Buxton, and it was a very relieved Linda who met cast members bearing props baskets and other stage kit at St John's on the Sunday afternoon. There was space to enjoy the Festival as audience, except for those three members who had responded to a call from EDGAS for extra chorus members for "Iolanthe". Five minutes into their dress rehearsal on the Monday afternoon, disaster struck. Our Treasurer, Anne Dolbear, tripped on stage and broke a hip, and lay in pain for two hours until the ambulance arrived. To coin a phrase, this "rather dislocated the rehearsal", so all but thirty minutes of the EDGAS show was unrehearsed on stage until the evening performance. But it was still a success, and received an Adjudicator's Special Award — for delivering a technically perfect show after a curtailed dress rehearsal.

Without Anne, Plan D was needed, and Moira Duncan duly grasped the ostrich feathers for Act 2. Thankfully, Tuesday was without incident: set-up was completed on schedule, and we ran Act 1 before the pre-show talk intervened, with Act 2 afterwards. But there was no early night for the team, as we had been asked to perform at the Club Cabaret in the Pavilion that evening. Few of us had previously been to the Festival, and the warm atmosphere of these post-show gatherings was both unexpected and very much enjoyed. Linda had carefully curated a professional show, starring Frances, Jennifer, Theo, and Kenneth, and making sure that "The Jury's Out" received maximum coverage. We were told that our cabaret sold at least thirty extra tickets!

St John's is a bit like an Edinburgh

Fringe venue. You wait outside until the previous event (for us an "HMS Pinafore" sing-along) finishes, fight your way in past the outgoing audience, and set up and start the show 15 minutes later. You have to be on your toes, remember where the hazards are, and work out where you can change without being spotted. In the interval, you fight the audience to get to the shared toilets! And, before you know it, the show is over and it's time for the get out.

We attracted a pretty full house, including old friends from far and near, and they were very responsive and appreciative, as were our reviewers:

"There was plenty for the busy and enthusiastic chorus … to do, which held the packed audience's attention as we didn't know what to expect. They also had to negotiate the different setting in St John's Church, but everyone looked like they were having fun.
"The icing on the (wedding) cake was an appearance from former member of the new D'Oyly Carte, Frances McCafferty as Katisha. Also the honorary President of DGASS, her rich, full-bodied timbre ("Oh fool, that fleest") and stage presence, was tail lashing!"

After our own show, we all enjoyed a rather different take on "The Mikado" in the Opera House, and the following days saw the company gradually disperse as other commitments called. We hadn't been competing for any of the awards, but the experience of performing in such illustrious company was mind-blowing, and Buxton itself is a great holiday destination. Will we go back if we're asked? Like a shot!