

## Scarborough Sea Wall Heritage Trail Project

**The Scarborough Spa - Mr Christopher James. Operations Delivery Manager.**

**Interviewed and transcribed by Huw Roberts in January 2024**

In or around 1626, Mrs Thomasin Farrer discovered the health-giving qualities of the waters at the location of what is currently the Scarborough Spa. To put that into perspective, Shakespeare had died just 10 years earlier. The year 2026 marks the 400th anniversary of that event, an event which directly led to the town of Scarborough, becoming the first British seaside resort. A Spa House was built on the site in the early 1700s, but was washed away by heavy seas in 1735. It was immediately replaced by a more substantial building, described as a saloon, which was itself destroyed by a major cliff fall in 1737. By this time the well-to-do in the North of England were visiting Scarborough to take the health giving waters. The storms of the early 1800s caused damage to subsequent buildings at the Spa. Following that damage, caused by a storm in 1836 a more robust building was opened in 1839 which included the concert hall for 500 people, but this proved too small for the ever increasing hordes of visitors that were attracted to the town. And so in 1858 the Central Assembly Hall was added with adjoining galleries that could seat 2000 people. Britain's first funicular cliff lift was added in 1875 giving access to the Spa from the high end hotels on the Esplanade. Since that time, the Spa has operated as a major entertainment and conference centre. Between 1950 and 1970, it was the most popular venue in Britain for the major political party conferences.

*Today I'm talking to Christopher James, Operations Delivery Manager at Scarborough Spa. Chris are you able to tell us about what was on offer to those who came to Scarborough in the 1700s in order to take the health giving waters.*

In the 1700s it was sort of in the early stages. They discovered the water in the 1600s, but it was more commercialised in the 1700s. It was the first time they actually built what would probably be described these days as a wooden structure or wooden shack that would sell bottled water and then obviously that developed into the building we're in now.

*In the 1800s the Spa developed to become an entertainment venue in addition to providing the health benefits of its waters. What information do you have on the entertainment available in those early years?*

Sadly, we don't have a lot of information on site regarding the entertainment in the early years. We know that towards the end of the 18th century, the beginning 19th century, that the Spa waters became less popular, so the new buildings that were built in the place of the old ones that suffered from a landslip or were subject to a storm were becoming more and more orientated around entertainment. In 1858, which some of the current building structure is from that time, the the main sort of section was saved from a fire later on in the 19th century, but from that time they had a large hall that would seat 2000 people and the when it was rebuilt in 1879, that's when they added the small theatre which is 555 seats. That was actually originally intended to be an art gallery with an open glass ceiling, but that was changed literally a year before the building was finished to accommodate more entertainment. Also interestingly, when the Grand Hall was built, the balcony level, when they put that in, the Victorians built it so precisely, within a few millimetres, which obviously was incredible for the time period, there's actually a balcony shield that is the wrong way up and we know that this was intentional on the part of the architect. It will show an imperfection in an otherwise perfect structure. There was a varying amount of orchestras that would play the orchestra. As it currently is, the Scarborough Spa Orchestra wasn't founded until 1912, but there was a lot of music and concerts in that period.

*Now you mentioned 1912, I have heard that there are some interesting stories relating to the war years.*

Yes, an interesting story we've heard about, one of the German U boats used to surface just so they could listen to the Scarborough Spa Orchestra. And there's one story of a captain of a U boat who rowed ashore to go to a cinema. Apparently he had the ticket stubs as proof that happened.

*That was a little bit cheeky, Chris wasn't it?*

Yes.

*How popular was the Spa in the inter war years and then again after World War 2?*

From our records, that's really when the entertainment really started to pick up at the Spa and obviously you've mentioned about the cliff lift; interestingly the cliff lift in its heyday was taking 700 passengers a day. More than 250,000 passengers in a calendar year. They were all travelling down to obviously listen to the entertainment that was happening there, but especially that era was when the orchestras started locally. There used to be a season that would run the year round and that was right up until the late 1970s that that ran for.

*Tell us about a few of those entertainers who graced the Spa with their presence during the past sixty years.*

We've obviously had a wide range. Max Jaffa was probably the most famous for the orchestra. I'm sure that probably some people out there might disagree with me. Alongside the orchestra season we've had a summer season running since 1880 in our theatre. And there's a plethora of stars, Les Wilson, Dougie Clark, Reg Leather and some more notable ones, Norman Wisdom, Bernie Clifton's been here, Billy Pearce, David Dixon. The list is sort of a Who's Who of the time who performed in the venue.

*How has the Spa developed following the closure of Futurist Theatre and after the opening of the Open Air Theatre?*

I haven't been here for very long at the time, 6 to 8 years for me. I think what is on offer down here at the Spa has always been different to those other two venues. Obviously the Open Air Theatre is more seasonal with a lot more seats and could attract those bigger acts. We've also done a lot of conferencing and we do a lot of functions. So we do a different amount of stuff down here. I'm not 100% sure with the futurist closure how much that's affected anything down here.

*Chris James, Operations Manager at the Scarborough Spa, thank you very much for telling us about the history of the Spa today. Thank you very much.  
The Scarborough Sea Wall Heritage Trail Project.*

Chris James - Scarborough Spa.

Interviewed by Huw Roberts.