

# Dr Fraser's Dream The Building of the St Pancras Almshouses

A verse play for the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
by Beth Shaw and Martin Bould of Domestic Theatre  
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## PROLOGUE

*Enter two current residents*

Resident 1 I live here and I'm intelligent and hearty,  
I'd like to welcome you to our party.  
(I'm just back from the Lord Southampton pub  
That very well-known social hub.)

We've got a surprise for you today:  
You're all going to take part in a play.  
My neighbour will now tell us more  
So that you'll know what's in store.

Resident 2 Let's remember the glory of times past  
When things were solid and built to last.  
(It was like that when I was in my nursery!)  
We're here to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary

Of the St Pancras almshouses. They're mighty fine  
And date from 1859.  
Our founder overcame obstacles and disputes  
So today we can enjoy the fruits.

Now, let's bring that man of mystery,  
Dr Donald Fraser, to reveal our history.

*Exeunt current residents*

Act 1 1850 - 1858

*Enter Dr Fraser and his mother Mrs Fraser*

Dr Fraser I'm a Scottish doctor and St Pancras churchwarden,  
I live in Camden in a nice house and garden.  
My aged mother lives with me and my wife.  
Mother's fed and clothed and has a nice life.

Mrs Fraser I'm the doctor's ma, Ay, Donald's a good son  
But it's not the same for everyone.  
Many old people are thrust out in the cold  
Just because they're poor and because they're old.

Dr Fraser They either go to the workhouse or die in the street.  
It's 1850 and I plan to give them a treat.  
I'll raise money for a haven for their twilight years  
Where they can rest after toil without any fears.

*Enter Reverend Dale and 2 Worthies*

Reverend Dale I'm the Vicar of St Pancras, Reverend Thomas Dale.  
We need social housing on a massive scale.  
It's the fallout from the Industrial Revolution.  
Let's gather some worthies to fund a solution!

Worthy 1 We're willing to support Dr Fraser's latest scheme.  
He needs our contacts to realise his dream.

Worthy 2 To build almshouses to the glory of our patron saint,  
St Pancras, local hero (famous, he ain't).

Rev Dale I'll give a stirring sermon with lots of passion  
Now supporting almshouses is in fashion.

Dr Fraser We must sell subscriptions to the good and the great  
To save old people from an ignominious fate.

Worthy 1 Actually our wives will form a Ladies Committee  
They'll slave away while we're sitting pretty

*Ladies Committee (Lady 1, Lady 2 and Lady 3) enter*

Lady 1 I'm the energetic Lady Number One.  
Let's work hard but let's have FUN!

Lady 2 I'm Second in command, Lady Number Two,  
Indispensable when there's lots to do.

Lady 3 And I'm humble Lady Number Three.  
No task's too lowly for little me.

Lady 1 We're helping Dr Fraser and this is how:

Open your wallet and buy a subscription NOW!

*Ladies move among the audience handing out forms*

Dr Fraser        We'll have a lottery for residents where subscribers vote  
                         (A bit like Big Brother but on a philanthropic note).  
                         That's our unique selling point – our U.S.P:  
                         Subscribe and choose the residents in our lottery!

Reverend Dale    Audience, hold on to your subscription paper  
                         As you'll get a vote later in this caper.

Dr Fraser        In this parish of St Pancras  
                         What we need as well is a wealthy bankeress.

Worthy 1        I know a young spinster with fabulous wealth  
                         Who takes an interest in the poor and their health.

Dr Fraser        Yes, Angela Burdett-Coutts is the woman for us  
                         We'll make her our first Lady Patroness.

Mrs Fraser      Why can't I be Patroness, I gave you the idea?

Dr Fraser        Sh, mother, she'll be brilliant, it's very clear.  
*Exeunt Mrs Fraser, Worthies and Ladies' Committee*

*Enter Angela Burdett-Coutts*

Angela Burdett-Coutts I'm Miss Coutts, shy but with a kind heart.  
                         In come I to play my part.  
                         My grandfather came from Edinburgh - he was Thomas Coutts  
                         (Like Dr Fraser I've got Scottish roots).

                         That's Coutts of Coutts Bank, entrusted by royalty.  
                         I'm the heir now and I offer you my loyalty.  
                         I'll be your Patroness for the next 50 years  
                         To encourage donations from other rich peers.

                         (Actually I've a connection to the church of St Pancras  
                         as that's where grandad secretly married an actress.)  
                         I'll start you off with a 50 guineas donation.  
                         Please, Dr Fraser, go on with your narration.

*Exit Angela Burdett-Coutts*

Dr Fraser        We built the first almshouses quite fast.  
                         They were in Wilkin Street but they didn't last  
                         As they were right in the path of the new railway.  
                         Here's the rail boss who wants to have his say.

*Enter Rail boss*

Rail boss        I'm the rail boss of the Hampstead and City Junction,

I sweep away almshouses without compunction.  
I'll make an offer for the land – just a paltry sum  
As I'll soon have the Trustees under my thumb.

Dr Fraser      Don't try to scare us with threatening looks.

Reverend Dale We can tell you're just a bunch of crooks!

Rail boss      I'm really only prepared to pay  
For the sliver of land taken by the railway.  
So I'm offering you only £2,350.  
You can manage on that as you're so thrifty.

Dr Fraser      We reject your offer out of hand  
As we know the whole site's worth at least 6 grand.

Rail boss      Fools! I'll see you in court, let the judge decide  
As I stand for 'growth', he'll be on my side.

*Exit Rail boss*

*Enter First Judge*

First Judge    I'm the Judge who hears this case.  
I intend to put the Trustees in their place.  
Almshouses have had their day  
So I'll let the rail boss have his way.

*(bangs gavel)*      'Next case'

*Exit First Judge*

*Enter Henry Baker*

Henry Baker    I'm Henry Baker, trustee and borough surveyor  
We're in a fix, this setback is major.  
But I'm an architect so I know the value of land  
We'll go to the Appeal Court to get our 6 grand.

Dr Fraser      I'm glad you've got a combative spirit.  
Let's get a barrister of the highest merit.

Reverend Dale And I wonder how the rail boss will feel  
When we take the case to the Court of Appeal.

COURT OF APPEAL

*Enter Court Usher, Barrister and Appeal Judge*

Court Usher    Order! Order! Silence in court!

Barrister      I'm the Trustees' barrister. Consider this thought:  
If you destroy any portion of a property  
So that it can no longer be used properly  
For the purpose for which it was originally intended  
Then compensation must be amended

To take into account the whole property's value.

Appeal Judge You're right, lets give the almshouses their due.  
As Appeal Judge, I now find in the Trustees favour.  
*Exeunt Court Usher, Barrister and Appeal Judge*

Reverend Dale Hoorah! That barrister was our saviour!

Dr Fraser We beat the railway in a legal fight  
And got the full value for the site.  
But I hear the residents are worried sick.  
Of course, they want it sorted out quick.

Reverend Dale Here come two residents to let us know  
The various concerns that worry them so.

*Sarah Bickford and Alice Cope enter*

Sarah Bickford I'm Sarah Bickford, a retired nurse from Devon.  
The almshouses are my idea of heaven.  
We're not ungrateful and we don't want to moan  
But where will we live till you build a new home?

Alice Cope I'm a retired housekeeper, Alice Cope.  
The almshouses are my only hope.  
We love our little homes and our regular pensions.  
Please kindly tell us your intentions.

Reverend Dale Bring on the rail boss, we better negotiate.

Dr Fraser (*to audience*) Audience, boo him, he's the bully we all hate!

*Enter Rail boss (Audience boo)*

Rail boss I concede that you won on a point of law  
Which left me feeling rather sore.  
But I could exploit this situation  
And use it to enhance my reputation

I'll let the residents stay two more years –  
Now folks, does that relieve your fears?

Alice Cope We're most grateful, sir. That's very handsome.  
You're a 19<sup>th</sup> century Richard Branson.

Sarah Bickford Let's go off home and tell the rest  
The future move may be for the best.

*Exeunt Alice Cope, Sarah Bickford and Rail boss*

Angela Burdett-Coutts  
(*from audience*)

I'm jolly pleased they sorted that out

So I didn't have to use my clout.  
I've invested heavily in railway shares.  
A conflict of interest would add to my cares.

It would be such a shame if the Age of Steam  
Were to get in the way of Dr Fraser's scheme.

Dr Fraser      Our new homes must be the best  
                    To give our residents their well-earned rest.

*(to Henry Baker)* Have you thought how they might be designed?

Henry Baker   I think you'll like what I have in mind.  
                    We don't want it to look 'institutional'  
                    But something recalling the rural idyll.  
                    A row of cottages around a grassy square,  
                    Something pleasing for when they stand and stare

Dr Fraser      It's hard work but I'll raise the lolly  
                    The ladies committee will do something jolly.

Act 2            1859

*Enter Dr Fraser and Henry Baker*

Dr Fraser,        We've bought some acres near at hand  
                      That were part of Lord Southampton's land.  
                      It's a healthy site by fields of goats and sheep  
                      That will gently lull the residents to sleep.

Henry Baker    It lies next to the Orphans Working School  
                      Where orphans live on bread and gruel.  
                      So it's in a philanthropic zone  
                      Which ensures the highest moral tone.

Dr Fraser        I hate to put a bit of a damp on  
                      But it's next to a pub – the Lord Southampton!

Henry Baker    Our rules will stop residents going on a bender.  
                      Meanwhile, put the building contract out to tender.

Dr Fraser        Builders' quotes are arriving by the dozen  
                      For this price and that price – my head is buzzing.

Henry Baker    Keep calm – we don't have to take the lowest quote.  
                      The most reliable builder will get my vote.

Dr Fraser        Mr Batterbury is a dependable man  
                      Who I'm sure will do the best he can.

Henry Baker    I fear other builders will kick up a fuss  
                      If we give Mr Batterbury our business.

*Enter Mr Timpson, disgruntled builder and Reverend Dale*

Mr Timpson     I'm Timpson, a builder with a grudge,  
                      Convinced the Trustees have done a fudge.  
                      So I've called a meeting at the Vestry Hall  
                      For the Trustees to justify to one and all...

Reverend Dale As Reverend, I better take the Chair.  
                      Speak up, Timpson, let's clear the air.

Timpson        Why did you choose Batterbury who was 426 pound  
                      Above the lowest tender? – that's not sound!  
                      The lowest tender usually gets accepted.  
                      I want to know why it was rejected.

Reverend Dale We're here to publicly explain  
                      That our priority is long-term gain.  
                      We refuse to do building on the cheap  
                      Because what you sow you reap.

You're disappointed and I'm sorry  
But we're employing Mr Batterbury

Timpson        I just wanted transparency come what may  
So this is where I exit the play.

*Exit Timpson*

Dr Fraser        I wonder why Timpson's so upset -  
Transparency's not been invented yet.

Henry Baker    *(to Reverend Dale)* Your tact and firmness were inspired

Reverend Dale        Oh I only did what was required.  
Now I'll get back to my master plan  
To build 10 churches if I can.  
Every neighbourhood must have it's church,  
I'm sorry that I'm leaving you in the lurch.

*Exit Reverend Dale*

Dr Fraser        The Reverend Dale has played his part -  
He was with us from the very start.  
But vicars come and vicars go  
We just have to get on with the show.

Henry Baker    To work, let's get on with the construction.  
Let's hope we don't have further ructions.

Angela Burdett-Coutts

*(from audience)*        It's not easy dispensing charity  
You need determination and clarity.  
You can't avoid conflict, that's the truth.  
I fear your path will not be smooth.





*Exeunt Sarah Bickford and Alice Cope muttering 'Whenever'*

Dr Fraser I'm uneasy that we let some houses out to rent.

Henry Baker But admit it, the money's heaven-sent!

Dr Fraser We let dwellings out at four shillings a week  
But that's not sheltering the old and the meek!

Henry Baker You know it's only a temporary measure

Dr Fraser Yet I fear we may repent at leisure.

Henry Baker You're worrying unduly, that's so draining.

Let's have the residents' lottery, it'll be entertaining.  
Summon the subscribers, lords and ladies of note  
Audience, you too can have a vote.

#### LOTTERY

Dr Fraser Let's call Canon Champneys our new vicar to preside.  
He'll tell us the rules and be our guide.

*Enter Canon Champneys*

Canon Champneys The rules for the Lottery are very strict  
But it's a sheltering haven if you're picked.  
You must be over 60 and have paid your rates  
And never queued at the workhouse gates.

*Angela Burdett-Coutts enters surreptitiously*

Angela Burdett-Coutts I'll slip in here among the crowd  
But please don't say my name aloud.  
Because I like to be the 'lady unknown'  
So I really don't want my cover blown.

Canon Champneys Who's the first candidate? Let's hear your voice.  
Listen carefully audience, then make your choice.

*Enter Thomas and Lucy Markwick, Ellen Lintott, Rebecca Sprinks,  
Walter and Eliza Efford*

Thomas Markwick I'm Thomas Markwick, honest working man  
Fallen into penury with my dear Lucy Ann.  
I've paid all my bills and worked hard all my life  
Being a coachbuilder with the help of my wife.

Ellen Lintott I'm Ellen Lintott, one of the deserving poor.  
I was a dyer from Kent but I don't work no more..  
So I go to church and recite all my prayers

For rescue from hardship, misery and cares.

Rebecca Sprinks      I'm sober, upright Rebecca Sprinks  
But desperation may drive me to drink (s).  
I'm a retired cook and I'm going for the sympathy vote:  
Just look at my rags and the holes in my coat!

Walter Efford      We're the Effords, an unappealing couple,  
(with wife)      No longer fit, no longer supple.  
We lack belief in our own worth.  
We don't expect Paradise on this earth.

Canon Champneys      Hurry along, don't dilly-dally  
If you dawdle, you'll drive us doolally.  
Who's next? Step up and say who you are.  
Don't mumble, that won't get you far.

*Rebecca Brown, Elizabeth Mary Money and Eliza Wakefield step forward*  
Rebecca Brown      I'm the seamstress, Rebecca Brown.  
I feel the world has let me down.  
I've always put other people first  
Now I'm old, I expect the worst.

Elizabeth Mary Money      I'm Elizabeth Mary Money  
I don't find life very funny.  
Everyone thinks my name's a joke  
But it's hard to laugh when you're stony broke.

Eliza Wakefield      I'm Eliza Wakefield, born in Dorset.  
I've spent my life sewing corsets.  
I'm tired and weary with limbs that are tottery,  
Please vote for me in this lottery.

Canon Champneys      Now audience, it's time to make your selection  
Choose between acceptance and rejection.

*Ladies 1, 2 and 3 move among audience collecting forms*

Lady 1      Cast your vote, don't delay.  
House some aged folk today.

Lady 2      Take pity on their sad position.  
Use your vote to improve their condition.

Lady 3      My heart bleeds for the good folk brought low.  
Please save them from a life of woe.

*Ladies hand in voting slips to Canon Champneys. He lifts up a scoreboard.*

Canon Champneys      Markwicks, Lintoot and Sprinks selected  
We regret the others are rejected.

Dr Fraser *to Effords* Mr and Mrs Efford you were far too modest.  
You won my sympathy so don't be distressed.  
In April the Trustees can vote you in  
So don't despair or turn to gin.

*Exeunt candidates, wailing or cheering as appropriate*  
*Exit Canon Champneys*

Act 4            1861 – 3

Henry Baker    We've finished two wings, we're on the last lap.  
We need to build the North Wing in that gap.

Dr Fraser        I'm so tired of fundraising, we need a corporate donor..

*Enter Henry Aste*

Henry Aste      Allow me, sir to take on that honour.

I'm Henry Aste of Upper Park Road,  
A corn merchant in philanthropic mode.  
I've four sons, four daughters and a loving wife.  
Now I want a memorial to my life.

I want a solid testimonial  
With a portico and arch, something mock-baronial.  
I'll build the front house at my expense  
If you can raise the pounds and pence  
To finally complete the North Wing.  
Do it within 6 months – now that's the thing!

Henry Baker    I like a challenge, I like a bet

Dr Fraser        Well, it's by the far the best offer we've had yet.

Henry Baker    Call the Committee ladies 1, 2 and 3  
To pull out the stops to raise lots of money.

*Enter Lady 1, Lady 2, Lady 3*

Lady 1            I'll arrange some balls and a participatory drama.  
We'll raise more funds than Barack Obama

Lady 2            And I'll do concerts and a fund-raising dinner  
Of the great and the good – it'll be a winner!

Lady 3            I know the local vicars so I'll use my connections.  
I'll get the churches to have special collections.

*Exeunt Ladies 1, 2 and 3*

Dr Fraser        Within 6 months, though it was touch and go  
We got funds to employ the builder Mr Rowe.  
We finished the North Wing at last  
Thanks to the challenge from Mr Aste.

Mr Aste            You needed two thousand pounds and you got it all  
And now my name's forever up on your wall.  
It wasn't a pact with the devil.  
It was all straight and on the level.  
I had a small but significant role  
I'll exit now I've achieved my goal.

*Exit Mr Aste*

Henry Baker Dr Fraser, you deserve congratulations.  
This is cause for celebration.

Dr Fraser Together we made a great team.  
You helped me realize my dream.  
Let's take a pint across the road  
As finally we've reaped what we sowed.

Henry Baker Yes, we can leave now in a blaze of glory  
And let the residents finish the story.

*Henry Baker and Dr Fraser exeunt to Lord Southampton pub*

*Enter current residents, Resident 1 and Resident 2*

Resident 1 It's a gripping tale without a doubt  
How these almshouses came about.  
Both these men will die in 1878  
But Miss Coutts will thrive beyond that date.

Resident 2 She was made a Baroness for her good works,  
Funding schools, homes and the Church.  
Though at 67 she'll marry a younger man  
Who was (scandalously!) American.

*Enter Angela Burdett-Coutts and Alice Cope*

Angela Burdett-Coutts I enjoy being known as 'Queen of the Poor.  
Charity was my passion, not a chore.  
I'll work on till January 1907  
When I'll be laid to rest and carried to Heaven.

Now Alice Cope will bring us back to the present  
Then we'll celebrate, that's always pleasant.

Alice Cope Remember me? I'm Alice Cope.  
I'd like to say it is my hope  
That all who'll live here feel truly blessed,  
Eat well, live well and take their rest.

THE END

## Appendix:

### CAST

Current resident 1

Current resident 2

Dr Donald Fraser (Scottish)

Mrs Fraser, his aged mother

Rev T A Dale, vicar of St Pancras until 1860

\*Canon Champneys, Vicar of St Pancras after 1860

Worthy 1

Worthy 2

Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts

Sarah Bickford, retired nurse, early resident

Alice Cope, retired housekeeper, early resident

Railway boss

Henry Baker, architect (Scottish)

Court usher

First Judge

Barrister

Appeal Judge

Timpson, disgruntled builder

Karl Marx

Mrs Marx

#### Successful candidates:

Thomas Markwick, coachbuilder

Lucy Ann Markwick, his wife, *non-speaking*

Ellen Lintott, dyer

Rebecca Sprinks, cook

#### Unsuccessful candidates:

Walter Efford

Eliza Efford, *non-speaking*

Rebecca Brown, seamstress

Elizabeth Mary Money

Eliza Wakefield, corset maker

Mr Henry Aste, a generous builder

Committee Lady 1, bossy

Committee Lady 2, busy

Committee Lady 3, humble

#### \*Note re Variation on the text

Mr George Smith-Drew, curate of St Pancras Church and relative of a current resident, may replace Canon Champneys in the Lottery scene in Act 3. In that case Dr Fraser will introduce him

‘Let’s call the curate Mr Drew Smith to preside..’

#### Note on sources:

This play was researched in the Camden Local Studies Centre, Holborn Library, the RIBA Library and the Marx Memorial Library. We also drew on Edna Healey’s excellent biography of Angela Burdett-Coutts Lady Unknown published by Sidgwick & Jackson, 1978.

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