

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

A verse play for the 150th 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 150th 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 19th 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.

Act 3 1859-61

Enter Dr Fraser and Henry Baker

Dr Fraser At last the building work's begun
 On the South Wing and two houses 'on the turn'.
 But are the workmen sick or just lazy?
 Their delays are driving me crazy!

Henry Baker First they joined up with the '9 hours movement'
 For shorter hours and other improvements.
 Now the strike has ended, they're back at their labours
 But I fear their hammering will annoy the neighbours.

Audience, stamp your feet for the sound of banging
You can be louder, let's hear some clanging.

Sound of hammering (by audience)

Enter Karl Marx and Mrs Marx who is weeping loudly

Karl Marx I'm Karl Marx, writer of some renown
 Unfortunately, we live a few doors down.
 Your noise drives my wife around the bend
 Can you tell me please when the work will end?

Dr Fraser I regret it will take the next few years...

Mrs Marx weeps more loudly

Karl Marx Oh, drat, you've confirmed our worst fears!

Mrs Marx If I carry on weeping, I'll lose my looks
 While my husband buries himself in his books.

Karl Marx I'll exit now I've made my contribution
 As I'm off to study revolution.

Exit Karl Marx and Mrs Marx

Dr Fraser Time passes and two wings are erected.
 We've 22 inmates yet I feel dejected.
 I get so many complaints from dawn till dusk,
 Sometimes I feel unequal to the task!

Enter Sarah Bickford and Alice Cope

Sarah Bickford We like our new homes but not all the mud
 And when it rains it's just like Noah's Flood!

Alice Cope There are no street signs so our visitors get lost
 Please get us signage at whatever the cost!
 I'm not one to advise my betters
 But what about an iron gate with the name in big letters?

Henry Baker We note your concerns, leave it with us.
 They will be dealt with in due course.

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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