

# The Busiest Man in England: A Life of Joseph Paxton, Gardener, Architect & Victorian Visionary

Kate Colquhoun

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Today one would be hard pressed to choose a "Pre-eminent Victorian," but among the Victorians themselves it was agreed that one figure towered above the rest. His name was Joseph Paxton (1803 1865), and he bestrode the worlds of horticulture, urban planning, and architecture like a colossus. This was the self-taught polymath who had a solution to every large-scale logistical problem, the genius whom an impossibly overworked Charles Dickens dubbed "The Busiest Man in England."

Rising quickly from humble beginnings, Paxton, at age 23, became head gardener and architect at Chatsworth, the estate of the sixth Duke of Devonshire. Under Paxton's direction, Chatsworth was transformed into the greatest garden in England, a paradise of magnificent greenhouses, gravity-defying fountains, and innovative waterworks. Queen Victoria herself came to marvel; here was Britain's answer to the hanging gardens of Babylon.

But it was the Crystal Palace, home of the Great Exhibition of 1851, that secured Paxton's fame. Two thousand men worked for eight months to complete this unprecedented temporary structure of iron and glass. It was six times the size of St. Paul's Cathedral, and entertained six million visitors. In the wake of its spectacular success, Paxton was in constant demand to design public buildings and propose ways to ease congestion in London, then the world's most populous city.

An artist among researchers, Kate Colquhoun handles her complex subject as if she were born to biography. She tells the compelling story of a man who embodied the Victorian ideals of self-improvement, industry, and civic service, and paints a touching portrait of a remarkably down-to-earth visionary.



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