

# Championing Derby: OUR PEOPLE

Many individuals across the city positively impact our local communities. In the second part of our Championing Derby series, we highlight three women who have made their own contributions in very different ways.

WORDS: Sarah Jenkin-Jones

## ‘I’m Derby born and bred’

**HELEN WATHALL MBE** is the fifth generation of her family to run Wathall’s funeral directors in Derbyshire and Staffordshire and chairs St Peters Quarter Business Improvement District (BID).

As one of the few women to be running a funeral business in a traditionally male-dominated profession, her contribution both to the industry and local community was recognised in 2019 when she was awarded the MBE.

Wathall’s is Derby’s longest established independent funeral directors – supporting local communities for the past 165 years – and Helen’s legacy as managing director has been significant.

One of her most notable successes has been the free Funeral Wishes service. Inspired by her own family experiences when her father Bill passed away suddenly in 1995, this enables people to register their funeral wishes to ease the burden for families when they pass.

Helen also launched Dandelions Bereavement Support 10 years ago to support people who have lost a loved one when they need it, including the Grief Journey programme, bereavement support groups and counselling for adults and children.

She’s led several major fundraising challenges for local organisations and has given her time voluntarily to be a board member of St Peters Quarter BID for more than 10 years – latterly as chair.

‘Our family values have always been at the heart of what we do and we support people at the most difficult time of their lives – enabling them to say goodbye to a loved one and then navigate their way through bereavement,’ explains Helen.

‘We’ve always been an integral part of the local business community and made a



Helen Wathall. Photo: Cactus Images Limited

positive difference at dark times for local communities, not least leading Derby’s war effort in the 1940s.

‘I was keen to be part of the BID which has created a community of local businesses to make positive change for this often forgotten part of the city centre and give business owners a voice with statutory authorities.

‘I’m Derby born and bred and proud of the many unique features of the city – not least that we’re a city with a village mentality and look out for each other.

‘I’m proud to have found different ways to support our communities and I know this will continue as my two daughters develop their roles in the business and take forward the Wathall’s mantle to the next generation.’



Kavita Oberoi. Photo: AVIT MEDIA

## ‘The sense of community here is strong’

**KAVITA OBEROI OBE** is a nationally-renowned entrepreneur and philanthropist. Having seen a gap in the market for clinical audit provision to the NHS and the pharmaceutical industry, Kavita set up her first business, Oberoi Consulting, in 2001. She also built up a commercial property portfolio and set up Oberoi Business Hub in Pride Park in 2012.

In 2009 she was named in a Bank of Scotland report as one of Britain’s 100 most entrepreneurial women and in 2014 was awarded an OBE for services to entrepreneurship and start-up businesses.

Kavita is a passionate advocate for business, healthcare, education and empowering women and girls.

Kavita’s inspiration for the Oberoi Business Hub came from her own experience of setting up her first business, Oberoi Consulting, in her spare bedroom.

Like many start-up businesses, she faced many challenges including the need for a premium business address (prior to

requiring office space), meeting rooms, call handling support and flexible administrative support to be able to establish and grow her business.

‘As the founder of the Oberoi Business Hub, I take great pride in how our services have significantly contributed to the growth journey of local entrepreneurs and growing businesses. I love helping them to thrive, expand and create more local jobs,’ she says.

‘Seeing local businesses grow and succeed with the support of the Business Hub is incredibly fulfilling. By enabling businesses to focus on their core activities and providing them with the infrastructure they need, we also play a crucial role in the economic development of Derby.’

Kavita believes one of the most rewarding aspects of her business and charity interests was the opportunity to give back to the community.

This includes funding rounds from the Oberoi Foundation, which supports causes related to women and health and setting up

the Derby Breakfast Club scheme to enable schools across the city to provide school children with a healthy breakfast which has been linked with higher attainment, more focus and a better overall educational experience.

She is also Patron of the Star Trust, which reinvests funds raised from the business community into local charities – making a tangible difference to the lives of those in local communities.

‘The combination of charity work and business support services allows me to have a meaningful impact on the city and its local businesses. It’s this blend of community involvement and entrepreneurial support I find most fulfilling.

‘What I love most about Derby is its unique blend of history and modernity. The city has a rich industrial heritage, yet it continues to evolve and innovate. The sense of community here is strong, with local businesses and residents working together to create a thriving environment.’

# ‘Derby has a particularly strong Bhangra scene’

**GOPA NATH** is head of Surtal Arts, Derby’s South Asian arts organisation, which has been at the forefront of bringing local communities together to celebrate different cultures and artforms.

Gopa grew up in a highly cultured family in India. She came to the UK as a teenager and moved to Derby when she got married – working for the civil service and raising a family.

Having developed a passion for the arts throughout her life, she was keen that her children learnt Indian classical music and dance to preserve their rich cultural heritage and joined forces with a small group of mothers to set up classes for their children.

This led to the formation of Surtal Arts in Derby 30 years ago, which has inspired many British-born South Asian artists – not least Gopa’s own daughter Nisha, a well-respected dancer.

Gopa continues to be the driving force behind Surtal Arts. ‘From the seed of an idea in 1994 and programming occasional events, we’ve grown into a key cultural partner in Derby – respected for our high quality delivery, cross cultural programming, commissions and as an advocate of diverse arts,’ she says. ‘Surtal Arts is unique in Derby and the surrounding area as being a multi-artform development agency with specialism in South Asian Arts.

‘We use this specialism as a foundation to collaborate with many arts and non-arts organisations, artists and communities to produce unique cross-cultural productions so the arts we offer are meaningful, inspiring and reflecting of the multicultural society we live in. Over the years we expanded our work into Derbyshire which means our audience has become more diverse. We had to change the way we engage with our audience, especially with our British young Asians.

‘Growing up in dual cultures can be very confusing. Being clear about one’s identity is hugely important and if we can help in that process through the arts, that’s very satisfying. Derby has a particularly strong Bhangra scene which has a distinct “Derby” sound. Over the years we’ve supported many young people who have become successful international Bhangra artists and we feel very proud in supporting them in their early career. We will continue to prioritise our work with children, young people and emerging artists from diverse and disadvantage communities of Derby. We plan to create creative opportunities for them to have a ‘place’ in the wider and mainstream arts world as creators, audience and participants.’



Gopa Nath, pictured with the Dean of Derby, the Very Rev Dr Peter Robinson. Photo: Gopa Nath



## DISCOVER DERBY'S GREATS

Derby Civic Society has, over the past 12 years, been erecting blue plaques to commemorate people of local, national or even international renown who have lived in or had strong links with the city.

You can view the trail at [derbycivicsociety.co.uk/blue-plaque-trail](http://derbycivicsociety.co.uk/blue-plaque-trail)

## STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Five Derby individuals who made their mark on the world.

### Erasmus Darwin

Grandfather to the more famous Darwin – Charles – Erasmus was nevertheless successful and notable in his own right as a renowned physician and a key thinker of the Midlands enlightenment. He spent several years living in Derby, notably on Full Street.

### Joseph Wright

An 18th century painter of some repute, Wright has been described as ‘the first professional painter to express the spirit of the Industrial Revolution’. A resident in his time of Queen Street, his work is still displayed proudly in the city city - home to the world’s largest collection of his works.

### John Flamsteed

Born in nearby Denby, John Flamsteed was educated in St. Peter’s Churchyard, Derby, close to his father’s malting business. Flamsteed became the first Astronomer Royal and is honoured in the city with a blue plaque. John Flamsteed Community School, on Derby Road, is also named in his honour.

### Herbert Spencer

One of the most consequential philosophers of his age (he was the first to coin the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’), Herbert Spencer was born and raised in Derby. A plaque commemorating him can be found on Exeter Street, where he was born.

### Dame Ellen MacArthur

Derby-born Ellen MacArthur made her mark far more recently than the others who feature in this list. MacArthur made headlines around the world in 2005 when she broke the world record for the fastest solo circumnavigation of the globe.



Self-Portrait at the age of about forty by Joseph Wright of Derby. Photo: Oliver Taylor/Derby Museums