

Cockermouth Post 2012

POST ARTICLE – FEBRUARY 2012

Many thanks to people who responded to last month's article and the request for information regarding John Moorwood. This month we've another request for information, this time concerning the Towers family of Lorton. Recently an old photograph was found by a gentleman at a recycling centre in Towcester. It was taken by a well-known Cockermouth photographer of the past, Fred Nainby, and shows a young man by the name of Allison White Towers. The man who found the photograph is keen to find out more about Allison and his family. Research so far has shown that Allison grew up in Lorton, went to Keswick School, and then Oxford, before enlisting and going off to fight in France in WWI. Sadly, he was killed on 2nd October 1916, a Private in the Household Cavalry of the Westmorland and Cumberland Hussars.

Allison was born in 1894 and grew up in Brackenthwaite, Lorton. In the 1911 census his family were living at Millbeck Farm, Lorton, and Allison was a boarder at Keswick School. Allison had a friend at Keswick, called Jack Oglethorpe, who was also from Lorton. Allison had two brothers and two sisters, John, Ernest, Mary and Dorothy. John apparently went to Australia, and Ernest moved to Grasmere. There is some suggestion too that the family were renowned builders, responsible for some of the public buildings in Workington. If anyone can shed further light on this or has further information about the family, then please do get in touch.

POST ARTICLE APRIL 2012

With the Georgian Fair on May 5th now very close, I thought I'd look at some aspects of Georgian Cockermouth. A few years back I visited Dove Cottage and spent some time going through the household accounts of the Wordsworth family during their time in Cockermouth. William was born on April 7th in 1770 and began his schooling at the Free Grammar School (on the site of the present Saints' Rooms). His brothers John and Christopher also went there, and on March 5th 1781 Mr Wordsworth senior paid 10 shillings to the Reverend Gillbanks for their entrance there, and then quarterly fees. William by that stage had moved on to board at Hawkshead School, and Hugh Tyson was paid £10 10s 0d in December 1779 for half a year's board for William and his brother Richard.

Of his early school days, William notes that they were happy, 'chiefly because I was left at liberty, then and in the vacations, to read whatever books I liked'. He later says that at Hawkshead School he learnt more Latin in a fortnight than he had 'during two preceding years at the school of Cockermouth'. Juliet Barker's 'Wordsworth: A Life in Letters' (from which the extracts here are taken) gives an interesting account of William's life and is thoroughly recommended.

Mr Wordsworth's household accounts mention all the expected kinds of payments: money paid to glaziers, stationers, horse hirers, painters, carpenters gardeners, saddlers and blacksmiths. Wages were paid to staff: £4 per annum to a maidservant called Amy, and 2/6 per week (12 ½ p) to a nurse hired at Christmas 1771. He doesn't seem to have had much luck with manservants: of Duncan Campbell, paid £2 12s. 6d at Martinmas 1772, he notes 'he ran away having rob'd me'. Robert McNought, hired in 1774 'did not come to his services in time so hired another'. Quite striking is the amount of wine, beer and spirits bought by the household: 10 gallons of sherry (1779), in addition to large quantities of brandy, rum, port, white wine, and small beer from 'the Brewery'. There would have been considerable entertaining done by Mr Wordsworth in his role as law-agent to Sir James Lowther.

Another name mentioned in the accounts is that of John Walker, whitesmith, of Main Street. Dr John Walker, who began his working life in Cockermonth in his father's whitesmith business, later trained as a doctor and devoted his life to vaccination in Europe and then in London. He became known as the 'apostle of vaccination' and he came from Cockermonth! John's contemporary at the Free Grammar School was Dr William Woodville, another important name in the world of medicine, who in 1791 became Director of the London Smallpox Hospital.

Georgian Cockermonth clearly produced some outstanding players on the international stage- and I haven't even mentioned John Dalton or Fearon Fallows yet! Come to our display at the Georgian Fair and find out more.

POST ARTICLE MAY 2012

I was told recently that there used to be a Cockermonth in America in Georgian times and decided to investigate – it's absolutely true. In New Hampshire today there is a town called Groton, for better or worse, originally called Cockermonth. It was called thus in honour of Charles Wyndham, Earl of Egremont who, from 1761 to 1763 was Secretary of State for the Southern Department, a post he succeeded to after William Pitt. This Department was responsible for, amongst other things, our territories in America. I emailed the Archives Department in Concord, New Hampshire for further details of our American cousins, and back came an assortment of documents, mostly detailing meetings of the town's Selectmen (the equivalent of our Town Councillors) and their various petitions to the House of Representatives of New Hampshire. For whatever reason the townsfolk had taken exception to the name Cockermonth, and in 1788 they had voted to have it changed to Danbury. Permission was given but, for some reason, the new name was not adopted. Clearly, the mutterings had not gone away and in 1796 approval was given to change the name of the town to Groton. Quite why such an unattractive name should be adopted smacks vaguely of desperation, and it would be fascinating to know why people took so strongly against the name of Cockermonth.

Groton today is a tiny town, with just 593 souls in 2010. It does, however, have the Cocker mouth River running through it, and an area known as Sculptured Rocks, with very beautiful rock formations, carved out and smoothed by the river snaking through it. If you take a look at a map of this part of the USA, it is littered with place-names recognisable to us (for example, Nottingham, Ipswich, Wilton, Bath – my favourite is Manchester-by-the-Sea), reflecting the fact that it was an area settled by descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers, who landed at Plymouth in 1620. In 1776 there was a petition, delivered on behalf of representatives of many townships roundabout, objecting to the inflated prices of the ‘necessaries of life’, worrying that this might cause rebellion and defection amongst the soldiers fighting on their behalf at that time. There must have been very mixed feelings too in 1812 when America declared war on Great Britain.

POST ARTICLE - JUNE 2012

By the time you read this the Royal Jubilee will have been well and truly celebrated in style; flags will have been waved, Jubilee street parties enjoyed throughout the land and Her Majesty will have smiled serenely throughout it all.

Back in 1887 when plans were well advanced for celebrating another royal Jubilee (the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria), every village round about seems to have had its own special plans. Keswick had a new park and suggestions were made for it to be called Jubilee or Victoria Park. Fierce opposition, however, resulted in the park being named Fitz Park. Here in Cocker mouth a suggestion was made to plant trees in Main Street and Station Street, as well as embark upon the provision of several new bridges for the town. Additionally, there were to be processions, bonfires, fireworks and much partying. Such plans were not without opposition, not least because of the cost involved, and worries about who was going to foot the bill. Mr Robert Mitchell (of the auctioneering family) was clearly not going to give in without a fight regarding the costs of the celebrations. At a meeting of the Jubilee Committee he proposed a tongue-in-cheek amendment:

“I propose that we, the loyal subjects of the ancient borough of Cocker mouth, do pray (but not humbly) that in consideration of having, during a period of 50 years, contributed our quota to the £385,000 annually paid to your Majesty, as well as having provided for your offspring in a lavish manner, amounting in the 50 years, at compound interest, to no less than £84,000 sterling, in addition to which, at your Majesty’s wish, provided lucrative and almost nothing-to-do situations for many of your German relatives and others – we therefore, in common reasoning, ask your Majesty to hand over one year’s income, viz. £385,000, to erect some useful and lasting memorial from a grateful Queen to her loving subjects ...”

The Committee declined to allow Mr Mitchell to go any further, and Jubilee celebrations went ahead as planned; Cocker mouth got its trees and new bridges (including Jubilee Bridge on Lorton Street), processions and bonfires. Meanwhile, the national and international press got wind of Mr Mitchell’s ‘amendment’, providing a source of great amusement to many readers.

POST ARTICLE – JULY 2012

Not long to go now until the start of our annual summer exhibition. This year we've chosen to take a look at some of the remarkable achievements of the Victorians and how they improved life in Cockermonth. Nationally, the Victorian period included the coming of the railways, provision of education, public health Acts, the setting-up of local government, police and fire brigade services, and the coming of gas, electricity, piped water and sewerage services.

In Cockermonth national events such as Victoria's Jubilee in 1887 brought major improvements in the form of new bridges and the planting of trees on Main Street. The appearance of Main Street changed with the erection of the Mayo statue, commemorating a former MP, and the Waugh memorial clock (demolished in 1932), raised in commemoration of Edward Waugh, another MP. Elsewhere in the town two new Churches appeared during this period – Christ Church, and St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church – whilst the All Saints' Church destroyed by fire in 1850 was rebuilt in very different architectural style and reopened in 1852. Fairfield Schools appeared, to supplement provision at All Saints', and St Joseph's Roman Catholic School in 1877. An Industrial School opened during the Victorian period (on the present Strawberry How site), and a new Workhouse was constructed between 1841-3 on Gallowbarrow. Many of the town's larger houses were built during this period, and housing in the Moor area of town developed rapidly from the 1860s onwards. Our beautiful cemetery and the two lovely Chapel buildings opened in 1856, and Harris Park in 1895. We reap the benefits of that and many other lovely parts of town, with their mature trees and mellowed appearance, very different to how they would have looked when first developed.

Not only were many improvements made to the appearance of our town by the Victorians, but traditions such as the Children's Carnival saw their beginnings back then through the instigation of Cousin Charley's May Day Parade. The fine tradition of bands in the town originated early in Victorian times, with the Mechanics' Band, Borough Band and Industrial School Band, for example.

POST ARTICLE AUGUST 2012

By the time you read this our exhibition at the Kirkgate Centre will be well under way. One of the topics we are looking at is the Industrial School, which opened in 1881 on the Strawberry How site. Industrial Schools were set up across the country, to provide board and lodging for potentially wayward boys, providing them with basic education, training for a trade, and lots of discipline.

We have a first-hand account of a gentleman called Kylie Gay who came to the Cockermonth Industrial School at the age of 7, early in the 20th century. He was brought all the way from London to Cockermonth by train, after his mother was put in prison and he was perceived by the courts to be in need of care and protection. He had been found

by a policeman late at night, sleeping under a market stall, waiting for his mother to come out of the pub. When he arrived at the School he was happy enough because he was presented with tea and a huge lump of cake. He remembers dingy and dark stonework and gaslight. There were several dormitories with 25 boys in each and he was asked whether he was a 'wet bed' - he discovered that the 'wet' beds had rubber the length of the mattress, with a hole in the middle and a bucket under it. There was a concrete slab and bucket in the middle of the dormitory:

"The master used to come out after a couple of hours, say at midnight, 'Come out, come on out of bed, urinate'. They got out of bed and they'd all stand around in a ring. And sometimes they'd do it all over me. Cos they were asleep, they didn't know what they were doing. And you got smacked round the ears if you didn't do as you were told. They treated you very roughly."

The boys were kitted out with clothes, and there were two pairs of shoes and two pairs of socks. One pair of shoes was kept highly polished and were worn to church. Kylie recalls that when he arrived he was given the number 84. He had inherited the number from a boy who had died and had been laid to rest in the Cemetery opposite. The teachers he describes as vicious, two men who had been discharged from the Navy after being wounded. The headmaster was apparently not always drunk, but 'very often' so. Meals had very little meat and large quantities of vegetables. Breakfast was porridge oats with salt:

"You could ask for more but you'd never get more because it would be passed to the boy in front and as they passed it along each would tip some out..."

Kylie survived his time at the School and eventually returned to London. His memories were recorded when Kylie was 90 years old. If you want to read more of his memories of school life, come along to our exhibition!

POST ARTICLE - SEPTEMBER 2012

The Mechanics' Institute movement was a national one, the first Mechanics' Institute having been set up in 1821 by George Birkbeck. The Institutes were seen as a means of stimulating the mind and furthering the education of working-class people – initially for men but increasingly for women too. The Cockermouth Mechanics' Institute was founded in 1845 by Robert Benson, a solicitor in Cockermouth, who remained its President until his death in 1858. The Cockermouth Mechanics' Institute, situated to the rear of the Savings Bank (to the right of the Police Station on Main Street), had a Library which members subscribed to. In 1886 subscribers paid 2s. 6d per half-year for the use of the Reading Room and Library. Another benefactor was Major General Richard

Benson, who bequeathed the whole of his considerable library, together with £100 when he died.

A large committee ran the Mechanics' Institute and their 1892 Report notes a membership of 209 people, with nearly 4,400 books and magazines having been borrowed during the year. A further 100 books had been bought, including 'Recollections of Tennyson, Ruskin, and Browning' and the intriguing 'Condemned as a Nihilist'. The 1893 Report mentions that the Reading Room, well-stocked with a range of newspapers, had been re-papered and painted, and the floors of both rooms re-covered for the comfort of users.

Associated with the Mechanics' Institute was the Mechanics' Band. It is difficult to know the precise year the Band was established; it may have been as early as 1825, but possibly not until 1845. It is certainly one of the oldest bands in the country. It has played an important part in virtually every community event in Cockermouth for a very long time and, indeed, continues to do so. The Mechanics' Band is part of Cockermouth's rich history.

POST ARTICLE - OCTOBER 2012

With the relocation of the Cockermouth Police Station, and the uncertain future of the former Police Station on Main Street, we realised that we had relatively little information about the history of police service in the town, so we were very pleased during our exhibition to have a visit from a descendant of Jacob Johnstone, a former Cockermouth Police Superintendent, and to hear some of the details of his police career, in particular an incident in Carlisle that nearly cost him his life.

The account of his retirement in 1907 notes that, during his time as a police officer, he had been severely kicked six times, twice stabbed by potters in Dumfriesshire, and once nearly fatally shot. In 1885 Superintendent Johnstone, then a humble police constable in Kingstown (Carlisle) confronted four armed robbers, who had stolen a quantity of valuable jewellery from Netherby Hall, the home of Sir Frederick Graham. With Jacob was his colleague Sergeant Roche, and in the ensuing struggle Sergeant Roche was shot in the arm:

"P.C. Johnstone at once went to the sergeant's assistance, helped him up, and together they pursued the men, who had made off towards Carlisle. This was the fine part, for the two officers now knew that the men were armed and desperate, but they did not 'funk' their duty to the public. After running about 25 yards P.C. Johnstone got up to one of the four men and was in the act of reaching forward to seize hold of him when the revolver again blazed about four yards in front of him. One of the men had turned round and deliberately shot him and he fell with a three-ounce bullet in his right breast. He was carried into his own police station, and for months lay between life and death ..."

The robbers had fled towards Penrith, and at Plumpton a P.C. Byrnes would receive a fatal gunshot wound. By now a major manhunt was under way, and finally the three men were apprehended at Tebay (one had got away). The three (Rudge, Martin, and Baker) were tried and found guilty at Carlisle Assizes after a three day trial in January 1886, and they were hanged shortly afterwards at Carlisle.

P.C. Johnstone made a remarkable recovery, and was presented with the bullet that had been extracted from his liver. P.C. Johnstone's great act of bravery and determination to do his duty was rewarded with promotion to Merit class Sergeant and service at Alston, followed in 1889 by promotion to Inspector at Penrith. In 1891 he became Superintendent at Cockermouth.

Gloria Edwards

POST ARTICLE - NOVEMBER 2012

We were recently looking through our photographs, specifically at the collection we have relating to Miller's shoe factory, formerly housed in the present Derwent Mill flats. We have several good photographs of groups of workers, football teams (including a Miller's Ladies' Football team), and views inside the various workshops. We know there will still be many former workers of Miller's living in the town, and this is an appeal to you for any memories you may have, however small, of what it was like to work there. If you would prefer it, we can come and talk to you and record memories, or you can jot something down on paper. Our picture shows a sewing room at Miller's – there must be people who recognise themselves, or relatives, working away at those sewing machines.

Miller's, housed in what was originally Harris Mill, came to Cockermouth from Great Yarmouth in 1940. They were shoe and slipper manufacturers, and brought with them around two hundred key workers, plus plant and machinery. In their hey-day they were producing around 70,000 pairs of footwear (shoes, boots and slippers) a week, for the retail trade at home and abroad. There was also a factory at Egremont (the former Ennerdale Mill) which was taken over by Miller's in 1952.

Miller's ceased trading in July 1990, after the receivers were called in. Plant and stock was auctioned off to offset the company's debts, and 350 people lost their jobs – a significant loss in a town of this size. Newspaper accounts of the time report that there was a good working atmosphere between staff and management at the factory, with weekly meetings in the board room to discuss the following week's work. Is this how other former workers remember it? Are there any amusing incidents from those long-gone days? We would love to hear from you.

Gloria Edwards

POST ARTICLE – DECEMBER 2012

People have always been interested in the weather, particularly so in this part of the world; there is a saying that if you don't like the weather, just wait a minute and there'll be something different. There was a Cockermouth grocer and tea dealer who, like many of his friends, was interested in all matters meteorological and kept very detailed readings relating to the weather. Not only that, he also kept a very useful diary, which gives a valuable insight into what was happening in town and further afield. Joseph Adair's diary for 1847 (which can be seen in Whitehaven Record Office) includes, for example, the opening of Parliament by Victoria, the ongoing distress in Ireland due to the potato famine, the intermittent provision of gas lighting in the town, and the opening of the railway on 27th April. This sounds as if it was a great occasion for a party, with 1,000 people availing themselves of the opportunity to board a train, cannons firing from dawn to dusk, bands playing, public dinners held, and the streets decorated with flags and bunting. A month earlier Joseph records that a slave had delivered a lecture at the Court House on the horrors of slavery, urging people to rise up against the practice. Messrs Aglionby and Horsman were elected as MPs for the borough of Cockermouth in July, and there is an amusing tale of Mr Mackreth's house being broken into at 2 a.m., when thieves actually lifted up the head of a sleeping Mr Mackreth to search under his pillow for money! His wife, although aware of what was happening, pretended to be sound asleep out of sheer terror.

And what of the weather? As well as detailed barometer readings, rainfall, temperatures and wind speeds, Joseph records an eclipse of the sun at around 7.30 a.m. on 9th October, noting that it was the largest that had happened for 83 years. On the 25th of that month he describes the 'beautiful' appearance of the Aurora Borealis. November was 'stormy, boisterous, blustery, wild, squally and unpleasant', with a greater quantity of rain falling during the month than during any of the previous months. Cockermouth is, of course, no stranger to floods; these have been a regular feature of life in the town for hundreds of years. Snow and ice have been a regular occurrence too, and our picture (late 19th century) shows a frozen River Derwent, with people walking on the ice. The end of January 1886 saw the streets of Cockermouth 'bound in ice', covered with snow, and treacherous.

Christmas 2012 may or may not be snowy, but either way we wish you a peaceful and happy time.