

Cockermouth Post 2013

POST ARTICLE FEBRUARY 2013

The recent fire at a garage in Cockermouth (which happened, interestingly enough, right next door to the Fire Station!) set me thinking about the development of fire services in the town. Our picture this week shows Cockermouth's first motor fire engine, bought by subscription for £500 in 1923. Here it is decorated for the children's carnival on Fairfield car park. The gentleman sitting next to the driver is Captain Joseph William Grave, who served 25 years as captain of Cockermouth fire brigade. Sadly, he died whilst on duty at a farm fire in Lorton in 1935. He had been directing operations when he suddenly felt unwell and died. Aged 72, he had already decided it was time for a younger man to take his place and had just tendered his resignation. Joseph had been badly burned in a petrol fire at Cockermouth some 20 years previously but had continued to give loyal service to the town. When he began his service it was on a horse-drawn engine, housed at the Fair Field. The Fire Brigade was later housed on Lorton Street, before moving to its present home.

The earliest type of fire engine would have been a hand-operated pump, carried on a horse-drawn vehicle. We know there was a meeting in 1817 to draw up rules for improving the fire service, when charges were fixed for dealing with fires in town and in the nearby villages. By 1847 the Vestry (precursor of the Town Council) was paying £16 per quarter for the maintenance of the fire engine, and in 1864 a booklet was produced: Rules of the Cockermouth Volunteer Fire Brigade. Dr Henry Dodgson was the Superintendent of the Committee charged with implementing the service, and the booklet lists 16 Acting Firemen and 30 Reserve Firemen, as well as 2 engineers and a Foreman (who had charge of the engine). The booklet set out in some detail duties of members of the Fire Brigade, as well as uniform, drill duties, care and maintenance of the fire engine. Sadly, all did not go according to plan: on one occasion in 1876, the brigade was called out to a barn fire in Greysouthen, where one catastrophe followed another – the engine had first to be excavated from beneath debris in the engine house, and then refused to budge because wheel bearings had rusted up. After speedy repairs, somebody set off to track down a pair of horses from the Globe Hotel, and the engine set off. It got as far as Brigham where a wheel parted company with the engine. Having fixed that, fate was against them because a few hundred yards further on, off came another wheel. They eventually reached the fire, started pumping, and pointed the hose hopefully – water emerged, but from everywhere but the nozzle! No doubt a day they wanted to forget, and we should probably count our blessings nowadays.

Gloria Edwards

POST ARTICLE - MARCH 2013

I recently found a book of poems, published in 1866, by George Chatt. George was born in 1838 and moved to Cockermouth in 1874 to become the first Editor of the West Cumberland Times, a position he held for 16 years. Clearly, he was a man interested in the written word, with some ability as a poet. His are mostly rather long poems, but this humorous shorter one ('Bring, oh, Bring') gives a flavour of his work:

*Bring, oh, bring me quickly here
A pound of steaks and a pint of beer;
My heart is sad as sad can be,
For the charming widow has jilted me.*

*I had no peace when she was nigh,
For mischief lurk'd in her laughing eye;
Yet I could not, could not keep away,
Her smile would haunt me night and day.*

*Her voice could charm like a song of glee;
But, oh, her lips, how they tempted me!
I'd leave my glass of the ruby wine,
For a single touch of her lips divine.*

*Like a daffodilly I pined away,
A-thinking about her every day;
Till one fine night, just after tea,
I asked her plump would she marry me.*

*She seal'd me up with her answer brief,
It cool'd my heart like a cabbage leaf;
I'll hang my harp on a gooseberry tree,
And away to the Fenian wars I'll flee.*

*But, no – I'll stay, and the girls I'll court,
'Twill vex my charmer to see the sport;
For I can reckon her up to a T,
The charming widow that jilted me.*

George lived on Brigham Road with wife Hannah and his four children, Mary, Isabella, Annie and George. Son George went on to become an apprentice printer in Cockermonth, Isabella and Mary died just one month apart in 1898 aged 30 and 32 respectively, whilst the other daughter, Annie, was destined to drown on the Lusitania in May 1915, aged 46, en route to New York. The Lusitania was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland by a German submarine and sank in 18 minutes. 1,196 people in total, including Annie, were lost.

Gloria Edwards

POST ARTICLE – APRIL 2013

A while back I wrote an article about a Cockermonth man, Norman McMaster, whose plane was shot down over Holland during WWII, and whose wristwatch had been carefully preserved since its discovery by a Dutch boy so long ago. It seems the Dutch are very keen researchers of their wartime history, since we've recently had another query, from a Gerard Jeuken in Holland about another Cockermonth man, Adolphus Appleton, who died during a fierce battle in October 1944. An area of woodland near to Gerard's father's farm was the site of the battle. British troops had arrived to relieve American forces, who had suffered heavy losses and were struggling to make progress in pushing back German troops. Adolphus was part of a group of

Scottish soldiers (10th Battalion, Highland Light Infantry), whose task was to clear both sides of the Asten/Meijel road, as far as Meijel itself. In the early morning of 30th October they had taken up positions near a wood, where many Germans were hiding. Fierce exchanges followed and Adolphus sadly lost his life in the fighting on the 31st, along with a Scottish soldier. Adolphus was 34 years old and was later buried in Mierlo cemetery. His parents were John and Margaret, and there were sisters Doris and Mary, plus brother Robert. The other man (George Robinson from South Killingholme, Scotland) was just 18. Gerard has been able to contact George's relatives to pass on reports of the battle that the men were involved in, plus pictures of the farm, and he would very much like to make contact with any relatives of Adolphus Appleton. Please get in touch and I can pass on information.

Still on a war theme, we are really pleased that there is now a commemorative plaque in the Moota Garden Centre, remembering all those people who passed through Moota's gates during World War II and afterwards. Muriel Simpson, owner of the Garden Centre, arranged for the placement of the plaque near to the entrance of the Great Escape coffee shop. We are grateful for her assistance, and the generosity of Cockermouth Rotary Club in helping to make this possible.

If anyone has information about the Merry Thought Camp, near Calthwaite (which also housed Italian and German POWs during WWII), please get in touch. We have had a query from an Italian whose grandfather spent time at Merry Thought, and he is keen to have further information/pictures to help him understand his grandfather's experiences. I was able to send him copies of Red Cross reports for the camp but he would welcome any additional information.

Gloria Edwards

POST ARTICLE – MAY 2013

Town councillors are busy trying to decide on a name for the new housing development on Sullart Street, and are looking to Cockermouth's past history for inspiration. That particular area was part of the workhouse gardens, but I can understand there might be some reluctance to live at such an address. One name mentioned was that of William Woodville. I was disappointed to read that none of our town councillors seemed to have heard of him. I'm sure there will be many people in the town saying they haven't heard of him either (unless you've been to some of our past exhibitions, of course!), but type his name into a Google search and all will be revealed. The little booklet produced for Cockermouth's Georgian Fair also has information about William, along with an example of one of his many botanical drawings. Our town councillors are busy people, doing good public service and managing the running of the town. I'm sure they must sometimes feel it's a thankless task, but their remit should also include an awareness of the importance of the town's rich heritage. After all, Cockermouth's history is one of the selling-points of the town for visitors, as well as being a source of pride for its townsfolk, and explains how it developed into the kind of town it is today. Local history needs to be nurtured, recorded and preserved or it will be lost to future generations. It doesn't need lots of money throwing at it necessarily, just support, interest and help where it can be provided. Incidentally, I've just returned from a holiday in the north of Scotland, where even the tiniest of places seemed to have its own museum or heritage centre.

I nearly forgot William! Like his contemporary, Dr John Walker, (also born in Cockermouth) he attended the Free Grammar School (where the present Saints' Rooms stands) in the 18th century. They both moved on from Cockermouth to make their mark in the field of smallpox and vaccination, following Jenner's pioneering work; John became known as the 'apostle of vaccination', travelling all around Europe with his colleague Dr Joseph Marshall (a Workington lad), vaccinating people until the day he died. William was appointed Physician at the London Smallpox Hospital, wrote a history of smallpox and its treatment, and found time to produce a collection of exquisite botanical drawings, drawn from flowers and herbs in his physic garden in the grounds of the Smallpox Hospital. These are just two men of many who made their mark on the national and international stages – and they came from Cockermouth! We should celebrate the fact.

Gloria Edwards

POST ARTICLE – JUNE 2013

With plans afoot for a likely amalgamation of Fairfield Infant and Junior Schools in September, it seems appropriate to take a look back at the school's history and people's memories of it. The Fairfield Girls' Board School opened in April 1876, a boys' section in 1884, and an extension to the original building opened in 1887. Bernard Bradbury notes that the school had a total accommodation for pupils of around 700 children, with 250 girls in the single-storey block, 250 boys upstairs in the two-storey building, and 200 infants downstairs. Before the extension was built, space was certainly at a premium, with children having to be rotated regularly to ensure they weren't sitting close to the fires for too long a period! The toilet block was, of course, outside – one teacher from just after the war years recalls with some satisfaction that this ensured no child spent more time away from the classroom than was absolutely necessary!

The same teacher recalls an incident at another school, not far from Cockermouth, when the Infant mistress drew the Head's attention to a little boy who never had any idea what day it was until Friday came – his hand would always shoot up then if the teacher asked which day it was. The Head asked the child how he knew when it was Friday and the boy answered that it was pay day. The Head turned to the mistress and asked if Friday was her pay-day, to which the mistress replied that it was not. "How do you account for that then?", enquired the Headteacher, to which the little boy replied: "It's pay-day for them what works". Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings!

With the war years came a large influx of evacuees, mostly from the north-east, who needed to be educated. The routine that developed was for local children to go to school in the mornings, and evacuees during the afternoon. Windows on the classrooms had tape put on them in case of bomb blast damage. The extra strain on resources, coupled with very bad weather in December 1940 led to the school's outside toilets freezing up, and the school had to close until late January. There was also an outbreak of measles which depleted attendance considerably. July 1943, however, saw great excitement with the distribution of bananas, which had been sent to schools in Cockermouth by members of the crew of HMS Melbreak, Cockermouth's 'adopted' warship. Bearing in mind that fruit was a rare commodity, especially

fruit that had to be imported, this was a momentous event. One lady remembers that all children under five received one banana each. When she took it home, it was cut up by her mother and served with custard to her six brothers and sisters and herself!

Gloria Edwards

POST ARTICLE - AUGUST 2013

Our exhibition, coming up at the Kirkgate Centre very shortly, will focus on an area of town that played a significant part in the community life of the town. The fairfield was used for a variety of purposes over the years, before the building of Fairfield Junior School in 1967 and the construction of the present-day car park and Sainsbury's. A pre-World War I aerial photo shows a large, grassed area, empty except for the Mitchell's Cattle Mart on its western edge and the present-day Fairfield Infants' School. Nestling in there somewhere were the Fairfield Works (agricultural implements) and Cockermonth's early Volunteer Fire Brigade. Around the time of World War I came the town's Public Mortuary next to the Auction Mart. The Fairfield was used to graze Irish cattle, brought in by railway, before they went to be sold. As the name suggests, the area was the site of fairs, such as the regular horse fairs held by Mitchell's, which had taken place for decades and attracted large numbers of people.

George Biddall, born into a circus family in 1848, brought his famous 'Biddall's Ghost Illusion' show to Cockermonth, and had long-standing connections with the town and the fairfield. Indeed, Fairfield was to be the place where he would die in 1909 in his caravan home after a serious illness. A surviving piece of film of his funeral shows George's body being taken from the caravan to his last resting-place in Cockermonth Cemetery. His funeral was one of the largest ever seen in Cockermonth, and is a reflection of the high esteem in which he was held. Many showmen attended the funeral and it was rumoured that Buffalo Bill Cody, who was in this country at the time, also attended. George's memorial, positioned within sight of the former Industrial School, towards whose inmates he showed great generosity and kindness, is the largest in the Cemetery. One of the clowns in Biddall's Ghost Illusion show was John Moncrieff, known as 'Bingo':

"Bingo is the name I adopted when I became a clown. And that was with that renowned show of Biddall's Ghost Illusion. The worthy and genial proprietor who was a thorough gentleman and highly esteemed, I have great recollections and pleasant thoughts of .. And of Bingo (me, of course) was it not said he was also clever and smart, a good tumbler and funny face maker that could tell his jokes and make them all laugh ..."

Poor Bingo's life had a tragic outcome, all the more poignant for his being a clown, since he ended his days in the Whitehaven Poor Law Institution (the Workhouse) in 1932 at the age of forty-nine.

You can find out more about the role of the fairfield by coming along to our exhibition at the Kirkgate Centre. It runs from Monday 5th to Saturday 31st August, open every day from 10-4 and it's free admission.

Gloria Edwards

POST ARTICLE - AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2013

We recently had a request from someone wanting to know about horse-racing that took place in the Slatefell/Highfield area of town. I am sure there will be older residents in the town who may have more information on this. I did find a news report in the West Cumberland Times (March 1876) on the Cockermouth Steeplechase, a cross-country event that seems to have been a regular fixture. Tipped to win was Polly, 'a grand, game, and honest mare', undergoing 'special preparation'. There are dark warnings of Polly having been interfered with before last year's race and the stable was taking special care to see that didn't happen again. Nothing much changes it seems. Unfortunately, there is no mention of where the race took place.

In April 1893 there is a report of the annual Cumberland Point-to-Point Race, promoted by members of the Cumberland Hunt, in the area around the Black Cock at Eaglesfield. Prominent local families were all in evidence, with Mr Senhouse of Netherhall as the starter and judge. The starting-point was Threapland Gill, going over Warthole, Moota, Millstone Moor and down a meadow to High Moor, a distance of about 3 ½ miles. Of the 11 competitors, Mr J H Jefferson of St Helen's came in first on Grasshopper, and Mr J J Mitchell was second on Kildare. But what of more modern times? Does anyone have any information on horse-racing in the area then? Please get in touch:

Gloria Edwards

POST ARTICLE – NOVEMBER 2013

This week saw extreme stormy weather sweeping across the country and then into Europe, leaving a trail of disruption and damage in its wake. We tend to mutter darkly about global warming and consequent changes to our weather patterns, but extremes of weather have always featured through the decades. The Great Storm of 1900, which caused considerable damage here in Cockermouth, resulted in a commemorative booklet being produced to record the events. January 1839 saw a hurricane-force wind ripping across the county over the Irish Sea, with rain lashing down and considerable damage caused. In Whitehaven a Maryport ship, the John Airey, was torn from her moorings and wrecked upon rocks. Elsewhere trees were uprooted, chimneys toppled and buildings damaged.

Floods, of course, have been a regular and recurring problem in the town, with the River Cocker (one of the fastest rising rivers in the country) and River Derwent bursting their banks with dreadful consequences. The most recent of these floods, as most people will remember, occurred in November 2009 when people had to be rescued from flooded buildings by boat or by helicopter, bridges and buildings were damaged, and many people were forced to spend time in rescue centres. Geese were seen swimming down Main Street, and Prince Charles arrived by helicopter to view events at first hand. Town businesses welcomed strange bed-fellows in the days that followed; do you remember you could buy bread in Limelighting? - and I seem to recall a Pensions consultancy in Market Place living side by side with a lingerie business. How wonderfully people came together, providing whatever help was needed. It is salutary to remember that many people were unable to return to their homes for several

months, with all the ensuing inconvenience and misery. Let's hope that the spanking new flood defences will do their job should they be needed.

Following last month's article, I'm pleased to say I now have further information from a reader about Herbert William Green, who appears on Cockermouth's War Memorial. He received the Military Medal (rather than the Military Cross) in 1916. If anyone else has information about relatives who served in WWI, we would be very pleased to hear from you as part of our preparations for WWI commemorations next year.

Gloria Edwards

POST ARTICLE – DECEMBER 2013

Something slightly different this month – hardly festive, but unusual. It concerns a South American mummy and its Cumbrian connections. Annie Aitken was born in Cockermouth in 1851 and in later years, as Mrs Annie Aitken, she went out to Peru with her husband and joined a thriving British community. Their two sons were sent, to a religious college in Melle, Belgium to continue their education. Mrs Aitken subsequently decided she would donate an Incan mummy to the college's small museum as a token of her appreciation. A mummy (Pocahontas II) was found by the British Consul in Tereca and arrangements made to ship it to Belgium via England. Pocahontas duly arrived safely in London on a L & NWR train. All was going well until an inquisitive porter opened the packing-case to investigate the contents. Imagine his horror when he discovered what he believed to be a corpse stuffed inside the case. His mistake was an easy one to make, since South American mummies are mummified in an upright position, with their knees drawn up to their chest, unlike their Egyptian counterparts. Naturally, the police had to be summoned and the inevitable inquest followed. The coroner's jury returned its verdict:

...this woman ... did die at some unknown date in some foreign country, probably South America, from some cause unknown ...

Needless to say, the press, at home and abroad, had a field day. Meanwhile, poor Pocahontas continued on her weary way to Melle in Belgium. Unfortunately, by the time she reached her destination, decomposition had started to set in, and she no longer smelt as pleasant as she had done at the start of her journey. In Belgium the order was given for the mummy to be buried in the local churchyard, although the college was allowed one withered hand to go on display (where it still is today).

Mrs Aitken was rather put out that her generous gift had come to grief and decided to sue the railway company for damages in December 1901. In court it was pointed out that there was no right of ownership over a corpse, and the Belgian authorities had treated it as a corpse ('*they do funny things in Belgium*', noted Mrs Aitken's counsel). But when does a mummy cease to be a corpse? (answer: '*uncertain*'), and isn't a corpse always a corpse? ('*no – but once a corpse has become a mummy, it is always a mummy!*'). Mrs Aitken, by that stage living back in Cockermouth, won her case, plus £75 damages and interest.

Gloria Edwards