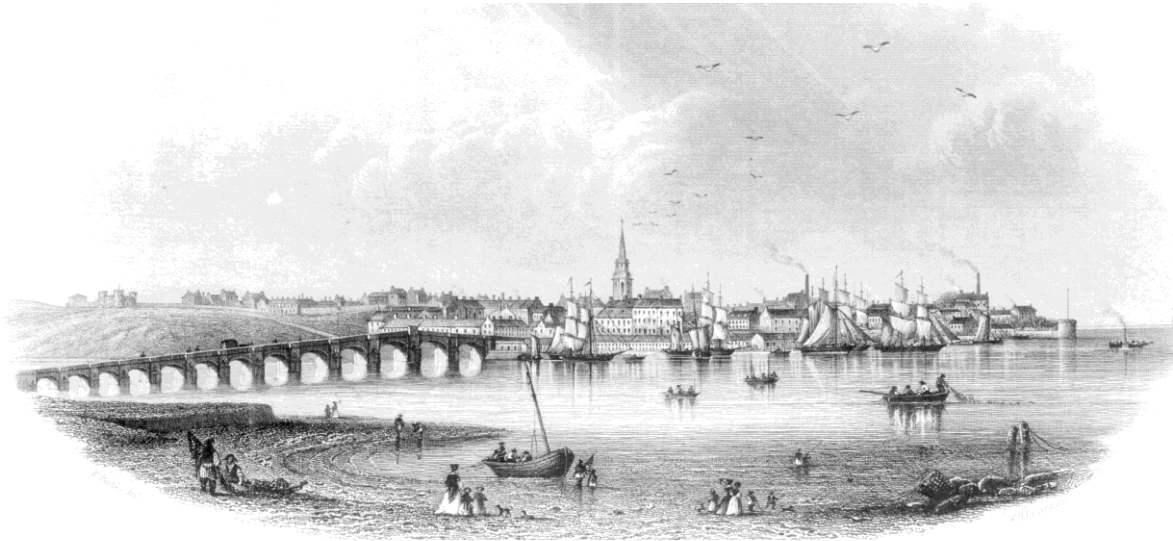


Friends of Berwick & District
Museum and Archives
Newsletter



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[Selected articles]

1998 February

THE NORFOLK

Recently the Record Office received on deposit a typescript history of Berwick-upon-Tweed and the Eastern Borders written by Mr Borthwick, Headmaster of Spittal School. In part II of the history, there was a section on "Whale Fishing - 1837" which contained extracts from a diary of Robert Nicholson who was on board the "Norfolk", a Berwick whaling ship trapped in the ice in January 1837. The extracts give us an insight into life on board ship at that time when the crew did not know whether they would survive or not.

January 15th 1837 The frost is very severe, and the ice has been pressing to a great height all around us. I must say that everything is mixed with mercy. To look around us anyone would think it impossible for a ship to drift down this Strait in safety in such a body of heavy ice. If anything were to happen to our ship at this time the Lord knows what would become of us for a man could not survive many hours upon the ice owing to the severity of the weather. We have not heard any word from the other three ships.

January 16th Today one of our men has been over to the Granville Bay and the Dee. One man died on board the Dee, and a great many more are lying badly on board of her. We saw the sun today for the first time after the absence of sixty-one days.

All men were called on deck to see if we could go on less provisions as our beef is running short. Three pieces of beef are boiled each day to serve forty-five men.

January 17th At 7 pm the ice closed very rapidly towards our ship, pieces from four to six feet thick turning one over the other from three to four tons in weight, which put us all in a great alarm. We got our provisions on to the ice, and put our sick men into a boat which we covered over with canvas to keep them from the cold winds and snow as some of them were unable to walk, and it was impossible to get them to any of the other ships.

Thank God we have been highly favoured, for when the ice was pressing close on us it suddenly stopped and came no further. Every man that was able had his chest and clothes in readiness to go on the ice. Thank God we had moonlight at the time.

January 18th The ice has been opening and closing around us all night.

We got an observation from the sun and found ourselves in Latitude 69 north. Another man died on the Dee, and there is not sufficient food to support the others who are sick.

January 21st The four ships are all in sight today. Our coal is getting scarce.

A fox was seen alongside our ship today but before the gun was got ready he escaped. These animals travel a long way from the land.

We are all becoming very weak owing to our poor diet. Most of our men have sore mouths and all are struck out with spots on the legs. Five of them are in bed.

January 27th No water or land to be seen. Our ship is drifting south at the rate of about two miles in the twenty-four hours. The ice is very still. Men are dying daily on the Dee. It is very disheartening to see them dropping off and all of us so weak.

February 4th A signal from the Dee to say that the captain had died in the night. His body has been placed in a coffin to be taken home if it is the Lord's will to liberate us.

The ship finally did escape from the ice but not before a number of her crew died. I have a copy of the crew list for the Norfolk, 1836-1837 but there is no Robert Nicholson listed. However, from other sources I have ascertained that the diary was in the possession of a Mrs Nicholson whose father was Thomas Crowther, a cooper on the Norfolk. If anyone knows the whereabouts of the original diary or has any information on it, please contact me at the Record Office. I would obviously like to trace it.

Linda Bankier

Stones & Statues

Introduction

There is little evidence remaining of statuary before the nineteenth century, though presumably the churches, chapels and castle of the Medieval period had their fair share. The palace built by the Earl of Dunbar on the castle site may also have had its carved stonework and wood. Most of this was lost through the centuries as time, demolition and lack of money took their toll.

The Wilson Family - Stonemasons and Sculptors.

The Wilson family had a long association with the Monumental Mason's yard at the Tweedmouth end of the Old Bridge. The founder of the firm, William Wilson is reputed to have come to build the railway bridge when work started in 1847. However it would seem that since two of his daughters were born in Bolton, Cumberland in 1846 and 1848 that he could not have arrived at the commencement of the work. As a highly skilled stonecarver it would seem more likely that he was employed in the later stages putting the decorative touches on the viaduct. Perhaps he was responsible for the dedication stone which was unveiled by Queen Victoria. He then seems to have decided to set up in business as a Monumental Mason and soon was running a flourishing business from the yard in Tweedmouth.

The firm was responsible for most of the gravestones in the district from about 1850 onwards. Occasionally some are signed W.Wilson on the base or some other unobtrusive spot. Most of this kind of work was done in the local sandstone, which, while it carves very well, is not always durable. Sometimes they also worked in marble for wealthier clients, and as the century progressed more frequently in granite which is now about the only material used for commemorative stones. Order books exist from about 1880 onwards which show that while their main business was headstones and the lettering on headstones, they also produced marble slabs for the cabinet makers in the town to use in wash stands and table tops and also decorative carving for buildings around the town. They were responsible for the short row of

terraced houses on Main Street, Spittal, known as Wilson Terrace and a monument to the family business. A close look at the building will show that most windows have a mask over them, the top floor windows have a variety of statues (several of which seem to represent Hercules or some similar figure and the rest are Medieval kings or knights). Even the gable wall has extraordinary touches in the date plaque for 1878, the floral swags round the windows and other touches. One suspects they may have had a hand in the nearby 178/180 Main Street with its classical busts and the fish scale appearance of the stonework and the very similar house in Tweed Street, Berwick. From the order books it is possible to find out some of the buildings they worked on including Cheswick House for which they provided a Coat of Arms.

The firm continued to be a family business until 1943 when it was sold to George Sutherland & Son of Galashiels. A younger son of the Sutherland family was to have run the business but was killed in World War II before he could take over. As a result the premises were run by a manager until they were sold to A. & J. Robertson (Granite) of Aberdeen in 1986. The tools of the trade and even the workshop stove are now housed in the Museum and can be seen in Window on Berwick.

James Wilson, Artist and Lighthouse Keeper.

Shortly before the Tweedmouth Wilson's had set up in business, another Wilson created the statue for which he is best known. As an artist James Wilson probably spent most of his time painting, but he did turn his hand to sculpture on one occasion and produced the work he is best remembered for - the statue of Jimmy Strength. Jimmy was a local character known for his feats of strength, his longevity (he died in 1844 reputedly at the age of 115) and his terrible fiddle playing. The original statue was life-sized (Jimmy's appearance was as extraordinary as his life, being very short with powerful shoulders and a fierce expression) and was to be raffled with each purchaser of a ticket being given a scaled down version of the statue in plaster. The winner of the original statue preferred to donate it to the town and it stood on Palace Green for many years until time and vandalism in the 1950's forced the remains to be removed to Wilson's yard at Tweedmouth. The broken pieces, virtually unrecognisable, were brought to the Museum with the contents of the workshop in 1986. James Wilson's other job was as lighthouse keeper for the Pier End Light at Berwick. His father had been the first keeper of the light and his son, Henry Betty Wilson, followed him in the post. The family lived in the house at the landward end of the Pier.

Despite having the same surname there seems to be no connection between the two Wilson families.

The Maclagan Memorial

For a long time Jimmy Strength's statue was the only public sculpture in the town until the death of Philip Whiteside Maclagan in 1892 at the age of 73. He had married Margaret Johnston, younger daughter of George Johnston M.D. the Naturalist, in 1847 and came to the town shortly after to join his father-in-law's medical practice. This he built up into a thriving practice earning the respect of both his colleagues and patients. He was also a keen member of Wallace Green Church and served its interests both as a lay preacher, an elder and a trustee of the British School. After his death on 25th May 1892 a meeting was held and a committee formed to find some way of commemorating the work of a good doctor and caring friend to all who knew him. After some deliberation it was decided to erect a memorial to him and any

surplus money would be given to some good cause to be chosen by his daughters. Subscriptions raised £758, £150 of which was spent on the memorial, which now stands outside the hospital overlooking the Walls and Castlegate carpark. Its original location was on the High Street close to the present Tweeddale Press premises, but it was removed to the hospital in 1922 to allow traffic to move more freely. Alterations to the hospital in 1993 necessitated another move from the front entrance to its present site.

Lady Jerningham Memorial

Annie, Lady Jerningham was the wife of Sir Hubert Jerningham of Longridge Towers. She had formerly been married to Charles Mather who owned Longridge House (which was demolished to make way for Longridge Towers) who had died shortly after the marriage. In 1874 she married Sir Hubert who was a diplomat and the last M. P. for the town (before it became part of the bigger Berwick division of Northumberland). Lady Jerningham supported him in his political career and went with him when he became firstly Governor of Mauritius (1892-7) and then Governor of Trinidad (1897-1900). However the tropical climate did not suit her health and they returned to Berwick in 1900. Lady Jerningham's health never really recovered and although her death in 1902 was not entirely unexpected it still saddened many people. Whilst she herself had not been active in public life she had been a supporter of many local charities and good causes and a regular attender at St. Cuthbert's R.C. Chapel. As a mark of respect her husband asked if he could erect a public memorial to her which resulted in the marble statue on Bankhill. This was carved by an Italian sculptor, G.P. Vennachini, from sketches done by Walter Ingram (who lived in Brussels - perhaps the Jerninghams knew of him through diplomatic contacts) and was sent up from London by train. Wilsons the stonemasons were responsible for erecting it on the base they had prepared and for making it ready for its unveiling in 1908.

War Memorials

Although there had been many wars fought before World War I, the impact of this war on people was far greater than any before. The sheer number of casualties meant that few families or communities could not have lost at least one of their members. The numbers also meant that repatriation of the remains was unrealistic but left friends and relatives without any form of memorial, unless they had the means to visit the war graves cemeteries which were quickly established after the war. The first Remembrance Day was commemorated with the erection of the Cenotaph in London, this had been intended as a temporary memorial but such was the strength of feeling that it remains the focus of the ceremonies in London. Many local communities then started to erect their own memorials as a focus for their local services of Remembrance.

Berwick was no exception and quickly set up a committee in 1919 to raise money for the project. At the first meeting in February 1919 various options were put forward including the erection of an obelisk suitably inscribed, scholarships for local school children or meeting rooms with commemorative photographs for each serviceman and his war record. However the scheme which appealed to most was a group of bronze plaques bearing the names of the fallen, which it was suggested should take the place of the Scotsgate. Many businesses favoured this idea as the Scotsgate was increasingly being seen as a traffic problem but the Town Council could not make up its mind. The Sanitary Authority Committee failed to make a decision and passed the matter on to the Works Committee. Finally they decided against the proposal at which point the War Memorial Committee resigned. The position might have

remained at impasse had not the sculptor chosen for the project, Alexander Carrick, suggested that a free standing monument in a suitable site (of which he thought there were plenty around the town) would be just as suitable. The site eventually chosen was outside St. Mary's Church, Castlegate which was offered by the Vicar and accepted by the Town Council in 1920. It took a further three years and the raising of over £2700 before Earl Haig was able to unveil the statue on the 11th November 1923, and another two years before the flagstones and railings were installed to complete the scheme.

Meanwhile, Tweedmouth, tired of the controversy surrounding the Berwick Memorial (which was to have included Tweedmouth men) went ahead with their own memorial. In the space of about a year the Tweedmouth committee raised over £1000 and were able to erect a memorial at the end of the Old Bridge, opposite Wilson's yard, and unveil it on 24th October 1920.

Liz Doley

BERWICK PLAQUES

Apart from the unobtrusive metallic plaques in Berwick's fortifications, such as -

COXON'S TOWER

Or

POWDER MAGAZINE

BUILT 1749

There are just three plaques on buildings within the Walls, namely the Johnston plaque on the Anchorage, Woolmarket, the Dickens tablet at the Hide Hill entrance to the King's Arms and the most recent, the tasteful ceramic plaque which commemorates Thomas Sword Good's residence at 21 Quay Walls. This plaque, commissioned by Geoff Herbert before his death in 1997, is also a memorial to his wife, carrying as it does Carol's initials (Figure 1).

Berwick is not over-endowed with plaques on buildings which mark the birthplace or residence of someone of distinction, a happening within or a building of significance. It therefore begs the somewhat unlikely question, if Berwick, with its colourful past, had been a London borough, how many blue plaques would there be on its buildings which survive? The most recent edition of The Blue Plaque Guide indicates that for more than a century, historians, tourists and passers-by have been fascinated by blue plaques identifying houses where remarkable individuals have lived. The plaques commemorate writers, artists, musicians, actors, inventors, reformers and politicians who have made a notable contribution to life in London, or beyond. When English Heritage, which manages the scheme, rejects applications for new plaques, it is usually on the grounds that the person in question is not 'of sufficient stature within his field'. It follows that there are occasional outbursts of surprise at the way English Heritage agree blue plaques. Its 'monopoly over our past' was questioned when a claim on behalf of John Buchan was ruled ineligible due to his London home, 76 Portland Place, where he had written The Thirty-Nine Steps and Greenmantle, having been rebuilt after being bombed in World War II.

Recognising the rigour applied in London to the erection of plaques it seems that in any provincial town, if the idea of having plaques is seen to be worth pursuing, one way of progressing would be to bring together individuals who gain pleasure from finding plaques in London or elsewhere. The danger of being too parochial is obvious as will be any attempt to apply conditions of 'criteria to be met', such as candidates having, for example, an entry in The Dictionary of National Biography or some other standard in his or her sphere. It is probable that the three plaques already erected in Berwick would have gained the approval of a validation group. That to George Johnston, although visually disappointing, and of doubtful accuracy, is to a pioneering zoologist with a national reputation, a respected local doctor and civic dignitary. The tablet which marks where Charles Dickens stayed on two occasions is an acceptable part of the way in which the hotel commemorates the place in which the great Victorian novelist gave readings to packed houses. The final plaque, a model of its kind with brown lettering on a cream background, marks the period during which a local painter, of national standing, lived on the town's walls. It was produced locally, at Tower Pottery, Tweedmouth.

Although wary of the need for caution when proposing additions to the existing plaques, and not wishing to subject the town's buildings to an outbreak of plaques commemorating fleeting visits, it may be worth putting the proposal to representatives of the Civic Society, the Friends of the Museum & Record Office, the Planning Committee of the Local Authority and the recently reformed History Society. Five mock-ups of possible plaques are included, to be erected on 2 Wellington Terrace (Figure 2), 28 Castle Terrace (Figure 3), an agreed point on the Elizabethan fortifications (Figure 4), on the former Regimental West House, at the Cowport (Figure 5) and on Gallowhill, in Tommy the Miller's field (Figure 6). Space does not allow the making of a case for any of the above, nor the inclusion of more historically remote characters, formerly resident in Berwick, such as Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, cousin of Elizabeth I; Robert Carey, Hunsdon's youngest son; or Peregrine Bertie, 11th Lord Willoughby d'Eresby. Apologies are extended to the Berwick History Society for having used its title on the mock-ups without permission, even before the Society officially exists. The proposal is an attempt not only to add further interest to the exterior of buildings in this historic town but to recapture and record yet more of the happenings which make it unique.



Plaque: **21 Quay Walls, Berwick**

Figure 1

Sited: **Front wall, to left of door**

Detail: **Finely cast & coloured**

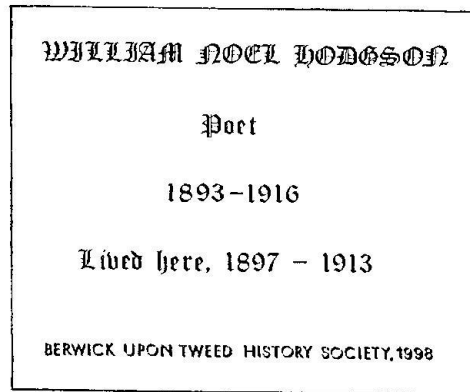


Figure 2

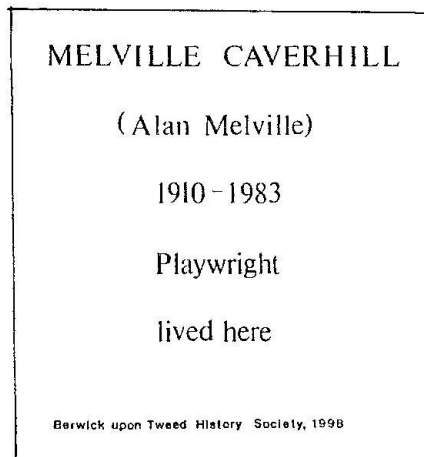


Figure 3

28 Castle Terrace

Robert Burns
NATIONAL BARD OF SCOTLAND WALKED ROUND THESE
ELIZABETHAN RAMPARTS WHILE ON HIS BORDER TOUR
17th MAY 1787
Berwick upon Tweed History Society, 1998

Figure 4
Elizabethan fortifications

MILITARY WASH-HOUSE
Former Regimental West House of the Barracks
from which GEORGE FLANNAGAN & JOHN
ROBERTSON stole two copper boilers in 1844.
They were each transported to Van Diemen's
Land for 7 years
Berwick upon Tweed History Society, 1998

Figure 5
Cowport

Gallowhill
SITE OF THE GALLOWS OF BERWICK UPON TWEED
LAST USED ON 26th JULY 1823 WHEN GRACIE
GRIFFIN WAS HANGED, BEFORE A LARGE CROWD,
FOR THE MURDER OF HER HUSBAND, JACK
Berwick upon Tweed History Society
1998

Figure 6
Tommy the Miller's Field

Jack Bainbridge

Dennis Nicholson - Hon Editor