



Literary Taste of a Victorian Notts Village

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A very small minority of modern youth, suffering, it is said, from extreme boredom, have turned to crime, violence and vandalism in their leisure hours. Their predecessors of less than a century ago had more reason for boredom, particularly in small villages where any form of entertainment or amusement was very scarce and had to be organised in each small community.

Such efforts were usually encouraged by tangible help from the squire of the village and other leading parishioners. Recently an old volume or issue-book has been kindly brought to my notice by the Nottinghamshire County Librarian, Mr. K.A. Stockham. This gives details of a small library which was started nearly ninety years ago at North Muskham, some three miles from Newark.

Library is perhaps an overstatement. It was rather a collection of books, slightly over 500, which were presented by a few gentlemen in the village and neighbourhood to provide suitable reading matter for the Bible Class. Small though it was, it formed a valuable addition to the few amenities of the village.

The County Librarian has been in touch with Mr. N.J. King, who was headmaster of the old village school for 37 years. He has provided some interesting information which throws further light on this early village library. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Mr. King recently completed a history of North Muskham.

It appears that the old issue-book was discovered by Mrs. F. Billyard, the head teacher of the North Muskham Primary School, when she was cleaning out a cupboard.

It comprises a list of all the books in the collection and also the names of those who borrowed them from time to time.

The volume was in use during the incumbency of the Rev. J.W. Hall, Vicar of North Muskham from 1855 to 1902. The small library was started in 1876, mainly for the benefit of the boys and girls of the Sunday School, but in due course it was made available to all the residents of the village.

The books were presented by the Hull family, the Rev. Fiennes Clinton, Rector of Cromwell, and Mr. J. Handley, who lived at The Grange, North Muskham. As it was started for the Bible Class, it is probable that the library was always kept in the Sunday School cupboard in the schoolroom where the Bible Class was held on Sunday afternoons.

The main feature of interest in this small library is that it gives some slight indication of the books that were read in a typical English village in mid-Victorian days.

Life unfolds

By recourse to directories of the period, it is also possible to identify the families of the young readers and to establish the trade or occupation of their fathers. The life of the village gradually unfolds as the inquiries proceed.

Although all my life I have read books covering a fair range of subjects, many of these volumes are quite unknown to me. Some of them have titles which reflect the outlook of the Victorian age. "Ben Wentworth's Revenge," "Motherless Maggie," "The Joy of Well Doing," "The Life and Adventures of Lady Annie and Marmaduke Vavasour," are a fair sample. Who has heard these days of "Esperance," a story of the siege of Rouen, or "The Lamplighter," which was well patronised by the Bible Class in North Muskham?

But there are some of the volumes which recall my early adventures into a literary world almost as far removed from the present as modern life is from the Middle Ages.

Love story?

A novel named "Queechy" stirs vague memories. It was in the library in my old home and I may have read it, but judging from the people who borrowed it at North Muskham, all women, it was probably a typical love story.



“Send Help,” by Samuel Smiles, I remember as an exceedingly dull book. It is not surprising that it was in small demand in this village library.

There were, however, a number of well-known books, including classics, which would be found in most libraries. Several of Charles Dickens’s works were read more by the adults of North Muskham than by the children. They included “Nicholas Nickleby,” “Oliver Twist,” “Pickwick Papers” and “David Copperfield.”

George Eliot was represented by “The Mill on the Floss” and “Adam Bede,” which was more popular than any of Dickens’s books. “The Pilgrim’s Progress” was in small demand and read by only two adults.

Sure winner

“Swiss Family Robinson” was a great favourite with the children, and “The Arabian Nights” was naturally a winner with the boys and girls, but “Tom Brown’s Schooldays” interested only two readers, and those were girls.

Another widely read volume was “The Adventures of Dr. Brady,” totally unfamiliar to me, and the “Lost Link” and “Foul Play” are titles that might well make a strong appeal to television producers.

One of the most omnivorous readers was Ted Hague, son of the gamekeeper at The Grange. The head gardener’s son, Jack Tidy, was also a regular patron of the library. The name of Hugh Baxter, the bakers son, is noted frequently in the old issue-book, while Charlotte Ebbins, the cobbler’s daughter was clearly very fond of reading.

Indeed, the tradesmen’s children were all encouraged to improve their minds, and Cecil Knight, a son of the village butcher, showed a partiality for the classics which was shared by few of his contemporaries.

Closing date

It is strange to find a farmer’s wife, Mrs. Mackley, high up in the list of patrons. In those days this was a full-time job that left very little time for reading.

After Canon Williams left in 1937 the Bible Class was closed and the books were taken away. The small library, which served a useful purpose for many years, had long since ceased to function. The last date noticed in the issue-book was 1904.

Very few of the old names are still to be found in North Muskham. The families have died out or are widely

scattered in this country and overseas. But this old library issue-book helps to preserve memories of the village of North Muskham as it was 80 years ago in the days of the old Queen.

This is a direct copy of the article that appeared in The Guardian Journal in 1964.

These memories have been typed by Gail
Sheehy. June 2019