

JANE WHITELOCK 1739-1794

As we research we often lose sight of the fact that behind our collection of names and dates are real lives. The following article from the Jan.1985 Cleveland FHS Journal goes far to bring that point home to us.

JANE WHITELOCK 1739-1794 - AN 18TH CENTURY YORKSHIRE LIFE by Raymond J. Skinner

During the year when John Wesley founded Methodism, there was born a girl in Yorkshire who was christened Jane. She was the child of a poor agricultural labourer, William Whitelock, who lived in the small village of Norton le Clay a short mile off the eastern side of the A1 road in the flat lands of the Vale of York.

Jane Whitelock had an older brother, John and a sister Frances - she would have had a second older sister, as well as, in due course, a younger one, both christened Mary; the first Mary, however, lived for only a few weeks, a victim of the appalling infant mortality among the poor at that time. As Jonas Hanway, a philanthropist of the day said, "few parish children live until they are even old enough to be apprenticed" - thousands, in fact, did not even live sufficiently long to become parish children.

Jane, however, came of sturdy Yorkshire stock inured to the hardships of toiling in the fields in all weathers and used to eking out the pennies of their parsimonious remuneration. Jane probably entered service at thirteen but by the age of twenty two she was a mother; unfortunately for her and her child, John, there was no legal father. As the register of the parish church at Cundall bluntly states "John, bastard son of Jane Whitelock of Norton le Clay, baptized 9th November 1761". The fate of John, and the identity of his father, have not so far been discovered, but anyone who has read Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" might supplement the imagination as to the possible circumstances of John's conception! Jane Whitelock was to remain unmarried for some years to come.

Jane's father, William Whitelock, died late in 1767 and even then Jane was again with child, for another illegitimate son was born some three months after her father's death. Because of this Jane may have been forced to leave the parish when it was realized that she was again pregnant, or she may even have chosen to go and sojourn with more sympathetic relations in a relatively distant village. In any event, the child was duly born, and an entry in the register of Gilling in Ryedale reads: "Thomas, baseborn son of Jane Whitelock of Cawton baptised 27th March 1768". Cawton is a tiny hamlet a mile from Gilling village and here Thomas later prospered to the extent of becoming the local shoemaker and lived most of his life in Cawton, eventually being buried in Gilling Churchyard.

Jane, therefore, had now two sons both born "on the wrong side of the blanket" and life must have been very hard for her in those days of settlement certificates and the ever present threat of the dreaded workhouse. It is true that the mid 18th century was the age when social benevolence and concern for the poor first began to make a tentative appearance among those able to afford the luxury; it was the age of the Wesley's, Cowper and William Wilberforce, of Captain Coram who agitated successfully for the project of a foundling hospital, and of General Oglethorpe who drew Parliament's attention to the scandal of debtor's prisons wherein gaolers tortured debtors to death in order to extract fees from those who had no money to give. In truth, however, manifestations of the humanitarian spirit were still few and far between and even those that did surface had little real effect on the municipal or legislative action of those who had the political power.

Two more years were to pass before Jane eventually married: the Husthwaite church register reading "Edward Knowles of Coxwold, miller, and Jane Whitelock, spinster of this parish, by licence, 16th July 1770". A marriage bond gives the age of the parties as "30 and upwards". This happy event was followed the next year by another: the baptismal register of Husthwaite records "William Knowles, son of Edward Knowles and Jane Whitelock born 9th April, christened 14th April 1771". Jane at last had a legitimate son! Her husband Edward Knowles had lived and worked in the same beautiful village of Coxwold which had been the home parsonage of Lawrence Sterne, famous author, humourist and wit, who had just finished writing his masterpiece "Tristram Shandy"; he had lived in nearby Shandy Hall until his death and burial in Coxwold churchyard in 1768. Sterne with his broad sympathies for the incongruities of the human condition would, no doubt, have had compassion with an earthy life such as Jane's for while he laughed at the odd experience which is human life, he also felt for mankind and for the afflicted and the suffering.

The next twenty years or so of Jane's life would seem to have been more domesticated, even humdrum, but sometime before 1791 the Knowles family moved some miles south to the little village of Little Ouseburn where she is recorded as living when she attended the baptism of her grandson, John Whitelock, at nearby Easingwold church on the 23rd January 1791.

Little Ouseburn became Jane's last resting place for she was buried there on 24th March 1794, the burial register reads: "Jane, wife of Edward Knowles of Little Ouseburn buried, pauper".

This final description of Jane reveals a poignant last chapter of her life indicative of great hardship and penury; her life seems to have consisted of many new starts and perhaps false hopes. Her husband, Edward, lived on until 1797 and even married again, so the reason

for Jane's death in poverty remains something of a mystery. So, today, she rests in the tranquil churchyard of Holy Trinity, Little Ouseburn, a mere seven or eight miles from the other village where she first saw the light of day; in her life she had traversed almost a full circle through the quadrilateral of countryside bounded by Thirsk in the north and York in the south, by the A1 in the west and the Hambleton and Howardian Hills in the north and east.

Jane had lived neither an easy or a long life by today's standards but a hard unremitting one calling for all the native resilience and hardiness which folk from this part of England like to think they possess. Very few would argue that Jane Whitelock must have possessed these qualities.