The trouble with Hexham

: a people's history

This tour starts outside the Old Gaol, [1] of which more later.

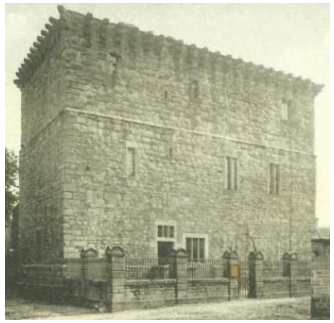
An Anglo-Saxon creation that grew up around the monastery founded in 674 by St Wilfrid, Hexham along with the rest of Northumberland, suffered from Viking incursions when a raiding party burnt down much of the monastery.

In 1069 Hexham will have suffered from the Harrying of the North, the scorched earth policy wreaked by William of Normandy, in revenge for resistance against the occupying Norman forces. It can be argued that the north of England never really recovered from this action which led to large-scale depopulation of northern England.

In the following centuries, the Tyne valley suffered both from Norman overlords and from raids from the north as Scottish barons tried, sometimes successfully, to lay claim to lands this side of the border.

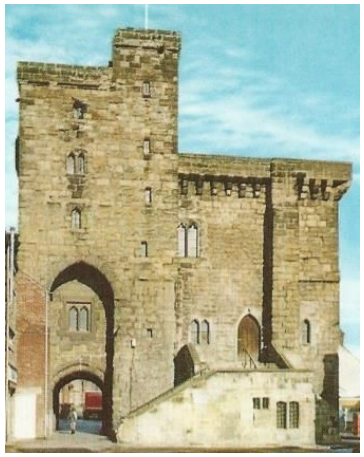
1296 saw the outbreak of open warfare between England and Scotland which ravaged the border area for the next 60 years. 1297 saw a Scottish force under William Wallace sweeping down the North Tyne valley to attack Hexham, burning down the priory and much of the town. The tale that they locked 200 novices in the priory school before burning them alive is likely to have been simply anti-Scottish propaganda! Nevertheless, armies on both sides will have lived off the land which, together with failed harvests and plague, led to general devastation of the area.

The breakdown of society and resulting lawlessness prompted the Archbishop of York, in 1330, to commission the building of this, England's first purpose-built prison to house his troublesome tenants. It is worth noting that official reports following two gaol breaks, 40 years apart, mentioned that in both cases the presence of a warder, and locks on the doors might have helped prevent the escapes; also that the roof and timbers needed attention. Government cutbacks are obviously nothing new!



The end of the Anglo-Scottish wars in 1357, saw the creation of the March Wardens, officials with vice-regal powers who attempted to maintain control, with laws particular to the Border, over what was by then a fairly lawless rural community now known as the Border Reivers. More properly referred to as the Surnames – a Border equivalent to the Scottish highland clan system - these extended families acted for mutual protection against raiders and as raiders themselves, as often against other English Surnames as their counterparts across the border!

Many Reiver names, such as Dodd, Elliott, Charlton, Armstrong and Ridley, are still prevalent in the area today. Over time, as is often the way, some came out on top (the Thatcherite minister, Nicholas Ridley, being a prime example) others evolved into respectable workers, whilst others still feature regularly in the court reports in our local newspaper!



The border was divided into three Marches: on the English side, the West March based at Carlisle; the Middle March, based at Alnwick and the East March based at Berwick. Situated in the centre of the Middle March, and closer to many of the more troublesome areas of North Tyne and Redesdale, Hexham evolved into a major administrative centre – equipped as it was with a proper prison. The Moothall [2], the arched building opposite the gaol, served as a court room and as secure accommodation for the March Warden and his staff.

Although the border was officially pacified following the unification of the kingdoms in 1603, with large-scale what would now be termed "ethnic cleansing" of many of the Surnames, the region retained its reputation for lawlessness for many years.

Now, walk through the arch under the Moothall and stand with your back to the Moothall, facing the abbey.

Hexham has had a market since 1239 and the market square served very much as an arena for public events over the centuries. In the mid-18th century, religion, politics and class war all came together in a saga played out across the Market Place

Hexham, like much of Northumberland, remained sympathetic to the Catholic faith and, the Jacobite cause. In 1715, the standard of James III (the Old Pretender) was raised in Hexham Market Place. This did not end well for the local Jacobites, and local landowner, James Ratcliffe, Earl of Derwentwater, was subsequently beheaded and his estates confiscated by the Crown. All of which explains why, some 30 years later, the Hexham establishment was very concerned by events leading up to the 1745 Jacobite rebellion.

The 18th century had seen the rise of the mercantile middle classes throughout the nation. One outcome of the resulting increase in large houses was a shortage of trained domestic staff – especially cooks able to provide food for smart dinner parties.

Looking diagonally to your left, above the end of the Shambles (the covered market) you will see the top storeys of the house [3] occupied by Lancelot Allgood, Protestant, Hanoverian, JP and later MP. To your immediate right, in what was

then the Black Bull Inn (now the Ex-Servicemen's Club), [4] lived John and Ann Cook, working-class, Catholic inn-keepers. John also organised the horseraces down on Tyne Green.

Allgood regarded the Cooks with suspicion. He saw both the hotel's assembly rooms and the horse-race meetings as opportunities for Jacobite gatherings. He prevaricated over granting the required licences and may also have interfered with wine supplies to the inn.

Relationships between the two families worsened and, although John Cook was prepared to compromise, Ann was not, and Allgood swore "*to be the destruction of the Bitch, his wife".* Eventually, the Cooks were forced out of Hexham, moving first to Morpeth, where Allgood's reach ensured they had to move on, then to Newcastle and finally to London. Interestingly, their daughters stayed behind running the Black Bull where they had to accommodate Hanoverian soldiers during the Jacobite Rebellion!

In the meantime, Lancelot's half-sister, Hannah Glasse, came to stay with the Allgoods. Following a ruinous marriage, Hannah turned to writing to acquire some income. Aware of the shortage of domestic servants, she decided to write a training manual. Published in 1747 under the customary soubriquet "A Lady", *The art of cookery, made plain and simple*, became an instant best-seller running to many editions.

In addition to her other grievances, Ann Cook, having worked as a cook-housekeeper before her marriage, took exception to what she saw as Hannah's condescension to professional cooks and wrote her own, entitled *Professed cookery*. So far, so good. However, some 10 years after being forced out of Hexham, and still boiling with resentment at their treatment, Ann brought out a second, enlarged edition which, among a fine selection of dishes suitable for serving to large numbers of discerning diners, Ann interspersed diatribes against both "Squire Flash" and his sister "A Lady" which, from this distance, make entertaining reading. Allgood's reaction is not known.

With the suppression of the '45 Rebellion, the Hanoverian establishment thrived and in 1760 Lancelot Allgood was knighted for services rendered. The following year, he played a major role in what is known as The Hexham Militia Riot.

Although ostensibly intended as a home-defence force, prior to the formation of the police in the 19th century, the militia also served in cases of civil unrest. Traditionally, the militia had been recruited from the villagers from the land owned by the gentry on whose land they lived – a sort of hangover from the feudal system.

However, by the mid-18th century, the increased threat of invasion by France induced the government to pass an act requiring all able-bodied males to be conscripted by ballot to serve for a limited time. This did not go down well. The radical, Thomas Spence, wrote, *"must not one's Privileges be very great in a Country where we dare not pluck a Hazel Nut? Is this an Englishman's Birth-right? Is it for this we are called upon to serve in the Militia to defend this Wood and this Country against the enemy? What must I say to the French, if they come? If they jeeringly ask me what I am fighting for? Must I tell them for my Country? For my dear Country in which I dare not pluck a Nut? Would not they laugh at me? Yes."*

Lacking any other effective means of protest at this time, working class rioting was a common occurrence and anti-militia riots occurred countrywide. In the northeast, anti-ballot protests happened at Gateshead, the protestors publishing a pamphlet which read: *"..what common men desire is men of estates to hire men for this militia as they were formerly; being very fit that they who have lands should hire men to maintain them; for it is a thing that none of us will submit to, to be balloted after this manner.."* The political temperature was obviously rising and there seems to have been a consensus to bring things to a head at the Hexham ballot, with protestors converging on the town from various directions.

The magistrates, led by Sir Lancelot Allgood, summoned the North Yorks Militia who had been stationed in Newcastle, to arrive in time for the ballot. The militia took up position more or less where you are now standing, facing the market place. Protestors gathered from Newburn in the east to Birtley in the north, a mixture of miners, agricultural labourers and craftsmen. (It would seem that Hexham residents kept their heads down, following warnings from the authorities.) Prior to the protest, Jane Allgood, Lancelot's wife, had lectured their tenants that *"If they don't behave themselves quietly and decently as loyal subjects ought to do in a Christian country they shall have a regiment of soldiers to drive them like a flock of sheep to slaughter."*

Some 5000 crowded into the Market Place, growing increasingly restive as their demands were rejected, and facing up to the Militia. The market place in 1761 was considerably smaller than it is now, with shops where you are now standing, and across the other side in front of the abbey, only cleared later to allow the cutting of Beaumont Street.

Faced with an increasingly hostile crowd, the Riot Act was read. It would seem that a rioter shot one of the militiamen and one of the officers, Ensign Hart, had his own weapon seized and turned on him. The militia then opened fire, initially resisting orders to cease fire. Around 52 were killed or later died of their wounds and a further 49 wounded. In the aftermath, Jane Allgood wrote that her cowed tenants "*would lye down and let me tread on them if I pleased.*" Oddly, the regimental museum of the Green Howards, into which the North York Militia were absorbed, makes no mention of its subsequent soubriquet, *The Hexham Butchers*!

Now, walk forward along the right-hand side of the market place into Market Street. Please take care when passing through the tight pinch-point in the road. Walk along Market Street until you come to the end of the shops on the right-hand side. The large house on the right [5] was built by Robert "Bobbie" Lowes, a successful

but corrupt lawyer and member of a local landed family.

An interesting side-light on the Riot is shown by a surviving letter from Robert in which he complains of the inconvenience caused by the Hexham Riot; business associates at a proposed meeting being unable to attend because of the crowds in the Market Place.

Cross the road and follow the road down along what is now Gilesgate, passing Hexham House [6], built as a home for 18th century abbey rectors. Their attitude towards many of their parishioners being shown in their reference to them as *"a pack of idle sparks"*. In later years, Hexham House served as Tynedale District Council offices and, in the 1980s, an emergency nuclear bunker was constructed in the basement, following the abandonment of the original ludicrous idea to build it on the roof of the Old Gaol!

Walk past Bouchon restaurant and turn left through the arch. [7] We have now entered the leather-working area of the town which stretched from here, down to the river. Active from the 17th century, making shoes, gloves and other leather goods, in its heyday, Hexham produced 23,504 pairs of the fine leather gloves known as Hexham Tans.

The associated trades of skinning and tanning all produce noxious fumes and waste, especially when combined with those of the iron foundry and gas works. Smallpox was rife and there were 2 cholera outbreaks, in 1853 & 1859. Although, nationwide, attempts were being made to improve sanitary conditions, a government report into conditions in Hexham in 1853 reported: *"That epidemic, endemic, and contagious diseases prevail, and that the local mortality is excessive. That some of the ratepayers are opposed to the introduction of the* [Public Health] *Act"* and went on to report *"In one house where there were about 40 persons residing, there have been 13 cases of smallpox and 12 of these cases were in 2 families. The windows of the rooms in which these families live open upon a yard, in which are two piggeries, a filthy privy, and a large dung heap...there are several groups of houses thickly inhabited, possessing no conveniences of any kind, and in a majority of instances, where such exist, they are used by several families, and no one attempts to keep them clean, while the want of drainage causes stagnant pools almost constantly to exist. In one instance the drainage from a piggery, privy and ashpit had found its way into the room of an adjoining house, and in consequence of the yard being level with the second floor of the house, the liquid oozes through the wall, runs down from the second to the first floor in such quantity as to wet the beds and to require that a well should be sunk in the room several feet deep, in which these pestiferous drainings are allowed to accumulate until it is full, and then they are removed to make room for more."*

Shockingly, almost 100 years later, in 1935, a visiting journalist reported conditions in a Gilesgate tenement: "*I asked how long her husband had been out of work. Her eyes flashed with sudden rage, 'He's not out of work,* (she said) *we pay half a crown a week for this room and we've gone to the council whenever there's been a vacancy in the new Council Houses and begged them to let us have one. We're quite willing to pay 10 bob a week but they won't let us take one. They say that they're not for the like of us; we shouldn't know how to look after them properly after living so low. Low? Have you seen our lavatories, mister? There are three for about eighty people up the alley,…and two of them aren't in working order.'"*

Return through the arch and turn right, up the hill. Continue up to the corner opposite Robert Lowes' house. Turn right under St Wilfrid's Gate, a relic of the medieval abbey, and continue through the carpark under the second arch. This is Carnaby House [8], built by Sir Reynold Carnaby who acquired much of the land and property of the abbey following the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Turn left and continue under the third arch, across the carpark, until you reach the road. You are now on Beaumont Street [9], commissioned by Thomas Wentworth Beaumont, lord of the manor, in 1864 to connect the market place with the turnpike road from Carlisle to Tyneside.

The Beaumont family, like many prosperous families in the area, made their wealth from plantations in the West Indies and then from exploitation of workers in the coalmines and industry at home. It is notable that the name Beaumont is still very common in Jamaica. The most prominent, Augustus Hardin Beaumont, is an interesting case. Despite being the owner of a substantial number of slaves himself, he was a vigorous advocate of abolition, albeit with compensation for the slave-owners. A journalist and lawyer by profession, he campaigned against both slavery and anti-Jewish legislation in Jamaica and, as a magistrate, he granted the first licence to a black preacher. Deeply unpopular amongst the Jamaican establishment, he moved to Newcastle where he stood in the General Election of 1837 on a platform of universal male suffrage and the nationalisation of railways and canals.

Sadly, we have not been able to establish any connection with slavery of the villains of this walk, the Allgoods. However, the name Allgood is again very common in Jamaica so we can accuse them of guilt by association as many slaves were given or acquired the surname of their former owners! The Blacketts, still the Lords of the Manor of Hexham, are known to have been involved in Jamaica before 1766 and were slave-owners on several estates in Barbados. One, John Blackett, was also a slave-trader, shipping to Grenada, Antigua and Trinidad.

Now walk along Beaumont Street, following the park railings on your right.

Before leaving the subject of slavery, it should be noted that Frederick Douglass, the former slave and anti-slavery campaigner, paid two visits to Hexham, in 1847 to the Methodists and in 1860 to the Congregationalists in The Scotch Church, which can be seen on the right at the top of Beaumont Street.

The statue at the top of Beaumont Street [10] is of Lt-Colonel George Elliott Benson. The Bensons of Allerwash are another local landed family and George was a typical "son of Empire", serving in imperial campaigns in India, Sudan, Ashanti and South Africa. In South Africa, it is known that he led forces responsible for undertaking *General Clearance Orders,* a euphemism for scorched earth policies and the rounding up of civilian Boers and natives into the British concentration camps. Apparently popular in Hexham, following his death in the Boer War, a committee was formed to raise funds for a commemoration. The story goes that Benson's position was given away by sunlight reflecting off his binoculars and, although it was originally that the statue should face down Beaumont Street, the sculptor suggested that the figure be turned to face south so that the sun would "reflect" off the glasses. There is also a suggestion that, knowing his position was about to be over-run, Benson attempted to call in British artillery fire to prevent the Boers capturing his own guns. How his remaining troops felt about this is not known.

To finish off this alternative history of Hexham, we'll have a quick look at prejudice, fascism and racism in the 20th and 21st centuries.

In 1937, Basque refugee children from the Spanish Civil War were lodged in Hexham as part of a national scheme. The children were not welcomed with open arms and an appeal for furniture and equipment was met with a poor response. A Hexham Courant editorial wrote *"a number of people think* (the refugees) *coming here is the result of a political stunt*" Whilst a letter in The Tynedale Mirror objected to the noise made by the children but conceded that the situation was, no doubt, exacerbated by local residents "*gazing all day long over the wall, giving the young Basques the impression that they are like animals on show."* Poor funding and disastrous management meant that the hostel closed in under a year.

There seems to have been deal of sympathy for Fascism in the town. In 1934, William Joyce (Lord Haw Haw) was the guest speaker at a meeting of the local chapter of the British Union of Fascists held at the Abbey Hotel (now the Beaumont Hotel) and in 1939, the BUF leader himself, Sir Oswald Mosley, gave an address to the local Rotary Club.

The feudalist attitude apparent in the lead up to the Hexham Riot was still hanging on, some 230 years later when I arrived in Hexham in 1980. Working for the local library service, I soon realised that every committee seemed to be chaired by Lady This, Sir That and occasionally, Lord The Other. Interestingly though, the Thatcherite proposal to privatise the library service was dismissed by the High Tory chair of the relevant committee with the words *"I don't think we need to waste any time on this nonsense!"*

Despite the warm welcoming of Fascists in the 1930s, and discounting the tale of the False Jew of Hexham (essentially a squabble between rival Baptist communities in the 17th century!) there has been little overt anti-Semitism in Hexham – largely, I suspect - because there is no evidence of a Jewish presence in Hexham before I arrived, despite an historical novel referring to the town's medieval Jewish Quarter!

However. situated as it is in what was referred to by anti-racist activists in the 1980s as "the white highlands", some 40 years later Hexham remains an overwhelmingly white community. Accordingly, overt racism has been limited to the occasional scrawled graffiti and a short-lived attempt by Britain First to have a stall in the market place. Nevertheless, increased awareness prompted by Black Lives Matter exposed the racism suffered by the still small non-white portion of the local community. Racist comments in social media prompted the formation of Hexham Against Racism in July 2020. The struggle continues!

Despite that, this is the end of *The Trouble with Hexham* walk - I hope you've found it of interest.

To get back to the Market Square, simply walk back down Beaumont Street towards the Abbey.

If you'd like to know more about the town, have a look at Hexham Local History Society's website www.hexhamhistorian.org

Further reading

- Bates, A. Hexham's leatherworking heritage. *Hexham Historian 22* (*2012)p3+*
- Benjamin, M & N. From Bilbao to Hexham. *Hexham Historian 20(*2010)*p3+*
- Burnet, Regula. *Ann Cook and friend* (Oxford UP, 1936)
- Corfe, T et al. *Hexham lives*. (Hexham Local History Society, 2006)
- Corfe, T. *Riot!: the Hexham Militia Riot, 1761* (Hexham Community Partnership, 2004)
- Green, M C. Ghosting through: commemorating George Elliott Benson. *Hexham Historian 24 (2014)p3+*
- Jennings, D et al. *The Heart of All England: Hexham's story in original documents* (Hexham Local History Society, 2005)
- Jennings, D. How many rioters were there? *Hexham Historian 16 (2006)p27+*
- *Dirty old town: the 1853 Rawlinson report into the sanitary condition of Hexham* (Hexham Local History Society, 2015)
- Finch, G et al. *A pack of idle sparks: letters from Hexham on the Church, the People, Corruption and Scandal, 1699-1740* (Hexham LHS, 2013)
- Summerson, H. Order, disorder and criminal activity in medieval Northumberland *Hexham Historian 14* (*2004)p3+*
- Slavery connections database https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/
- What details are known of Frederick Douglass's visits to Hexham can be found on the Hexham Against Racism Facebook page

This leaflet was written by Mark Benjamin and produced as part of the Tynedale Transformed Festival, Oct 2020

Tynedale Transformed
2020
Facing the Future