

Men That Are Gone From The Households Of Darlington

by Henry Spencer

1862

In an ideal world, you would read this book with 'Google StreetView' up on your computer screen, or at the very least with a road map of Darlington open in front of you. It comprises a tour of the town, street by street, shop, inn, and house by house, with an inventory of the characters who resided at each address. Beginning at the 'today' of 1862, it works backwards as far as memory, research and local folklore permit. With a couple of comprehensive indexes, it is a treasure-trove for any researcher into particular people or places; but it is also a window into the character, life and dramas of the town itself. It is like watching a black-and-white photo turn sepia, then colour, then morph into video, such is the evident pleasure taken by the author in bringing to life the scene before him.

Apart from the dates of the life-span, the next salient fact in a biography is a man's occupation. (Women do creep in from time to time, but this is mostly a narrative of men.) The book amasses a social history in cross-section, almost like a census, in uncovering all the occupations held by the inhabitants of the town. Biscuit Bakers, Curriers, Combers, Glovers, Farriers, Whitesmiths, Saddlers, Twine-Spinners, Ropemakers, Barbers, Ostlers, Bellhangers and so on. How wonderful to meet the 'Cutler and repairer of Umbrellas', or the man who keeps donkeys and sells cockles, the 'dresser of currants' and best of all for the wit provoked in Mr Spencer, the fabulous Mr Thomas Wilkinson, Stay-maker and Pawnbroker, 'circumscribing the waists of some ladies and furnishing means for the wastes of some others.'

The manner of a man's death is an enduring fascination and from tragic accidents to just deserts, there is every possible alternative accounted for within these pages. Pity the poor man who died of 'gangrene, resulting from unskilfully paring the nail of one of his toes'; and the suicide witnessed by a bystander who failed to intervene on the grounds that 'I thought he had a right to please himself'. Spencer is mercifully unlike the Methodist biographers whose besetting vice he describes as turning 'all their geese into swans'.

What broadens the appeal of the book is the larger story of the town itself and the pages sparkle with accounts of brawls, transcripts of court cases, histories of particular buildings and famous incidents. There are the 'Tea Wars' between two tradesmen which furnished much business for the printers in publishing their opposing and scurrilous advertisements; other underhand marketing ploys included dressing and affecting the modes of speech usual amongst Quakers. Mr Wilson's hardware shop was the first place in the world to have sliding shutters – he got the idea for their construction from a piece of furniture in the bedroom of an Inn he had stayed in. Nuggets like these abound. There is a relish for the comic too, the practical jokes played by the townspeople upon each other, nicknames given and well-polished tall tales, like the two stammerers, who, meeting each other, each thought the other mocked him...

There is a serious amount of history in here too. Long accounts of the progress of the Churches and Schools in the town, the Charitable institutions, and a very in-depth study of the growth of Methodism locally. What lingers in the memory however, is the small portraits, the man who never changed his clothes, the man who at thirty, weighed thirty-three stone and was a graceful dancer nonetheless, the man who never washed, the family who all went different ways on a Sunday: 'the good old dame went to Meeting, her daughters to Bondgate chapel, Samuel, the elder, to Church and Samuel, the younger, worshipped nature in the sunshine, leaning against the corner of Mr Hardy's shop'.