

A KING'S CLIFFE ECCENTRIC - WILLIAM DAKIN

By Canon John Bryan © August 2002

Seventy years had past when in 1909 the memories of really old residents of King's Cliffe were stirred by an enquiry lodged in the Peterborough Advertiser of 23rd October 1909 concerning an eccentric of the village who had died in the year 1840. This enquiry ran: " AN ODDITY. `Archaeologist' writes: Can any of your King's Cliffe readers, or others, give me any information concerning Will Deacon, the wooden spoon hawker of King's Cliffe ? He was a local worthy, or oddity, of a generation or two ago, and his curious and extraordinary life was published in the form of a pamphlet or book". Sure enough, the next issue of the Advertiser, 30th Oct. 1909, carried this response to the enquiry: " WILL DAKIN " "With reference to the enquiry in your last issue concerning Will Deacon, the wooden spoon hawker of King's Cliffe, a correspondent writes as follows:- William Dakin, not Deacon, was a native of King's Cliffe having been born here in 1755, and he died in 1840, at the advanced age of 85. There is a book descriptive of his strange life, as your Correspondent mentions, and the late Mr. J. T. Bailey, father of Mr. Albert Bailey, of the Post Office, used to possess a copy of it. It was full of curious anecdotes concerning Dakin and his travels, but whether there is a copy of the book extant in King's Cliffe at the present time is more than doubtful. Will Dakin was an eccentric man, well known throughout England, Scotland and Wales, and even Ireland, as a hawker of the woodware made in King's Cliffe. To this day many curious and humorous stories are told by old residents in Cliffe not only of his eccentricity but of his generosity. He is described as being a tall, stout, strong man. He had several donkeys with peds, and it was his custom to purchase the woodware made by the King's Cliffe wood turners, load up his donkeys with it, and then make a journey into different parts of the British Isles selling these wares, returning to Cliffe for fresh supplies or ordering them to be sent to different parts of the country when he was far away. In those days the wood-turning industry of Cliffe was very flourishing. Not only were there large firms employing numerous journeymen, but there was a lathe in almost every house in the village. Dakin drove such a thriving business that he amassed a considerable fortune and purchased a good deal of property in and around King's Cliffe. Where the Railway Station at Cliffe now stands there were formerly two fields which went by the name of the Great Dakins and the Little Dakins. The station now stands on the Little Dakins Close. He also had two parcels of land in the Second Drift, another on the Stamford Road, and had other property round about. The whole of it was made out of his travelling with his donkeys selling woodware.

To persons in genuine distress he was very generous, and generally to applications from poor people he rarely turned a deaf ear. But to loafers, though he would relieve them, he always gave them a taste of hard work before they received his alms.

But those were halcyon days for King's Cliffe. There was not a more prosperous township in the country than Cliffe. There were at least fifty good firms engaged in wood-turning, and towards the end of that period one or more of them had set up steam engines to run their lathes. Only three firms are left in Cliffe to represent the once ancient and flourishing industry. These are Messrs. Coleman and Pell, Messrs. J. Bailey and Son, and Mr. V. Green. There are a few others engaged in the industry as carvers or turners, but they work in connection with the firms indicated. Not only was King's Cliffe most prosperous in those days of half a century ago, but the industry provided livings for large numbers of hawkers, like Will Dakin, who travelled the British Isles with King's Cliffe wares. The Cliffe people made great stocks of articles in the winter months. In the spring the wood-hawkers would arrive and would practically clear all the workshops of their stores. Those were the days when fourteen or fifteen journeymen would be found at work in the well-known turning-shops of Mr. Hill, and assistants or journeymen would be found working under Mr. Levi Dixon, Mr. Elijah Dixon, Mr. Bollans, and many others.

Will Dakin now sleeps in peace in the King's Cliffe Churchyard, where his gravestone may still be seen a few yards from the entrance to the churchyard on the right-hand side of the path."

So much, then, for this Article in the Peterborough Advertiser of October 1909. Whilst there is a degree of exaggeration in it concerning the extent and prosperity of the wood-turning trade in former days, it does at least show how significant the trade had been. And it does introduce us to this King's Cliffe eccentric, whose gravestone, incidentally, is still there in the churchyard, a few yards along the right-hand side, against the railings, as one enters by the main gate.

But it so happens that we find a contemporary account of Will Dakin in the Gentleman's Magazine of October 1800:

" Anecdotes of W. Dakin, a charitable Enthusiast

Newbury, Berks., Sept. 9.

Mr. Urban,

I have inclosed you an account of the famous man with the black beard, who goes round the country distributing money to the poor, which he did in the towns of Reading and Henley to a large amount, with an exact sketch of him, which was taken as he was selling his goods here by an artist in this town.



As I was at Cliff not long since, you may depend on its authenticity. Though I before transmitted it to the county paper, yet he is so singular a character, and has excited such curiosity in most parts of the kingdom, that your valuable and widely circulating Publication appeared (with your permission) the only proper channel to convey it to the publick.

WILLIAM DAKIN is chiefly resident at Cliff Regis, about six miles from Oundle, Northamptonshire. He is not more than 45 years of age, though the coarse dirty habit which he constantly wears, and the enormous length of his beard, which he suffers to grow (only now and then clipping it with scissors), give him a much older appearance. Nor was he always that filthy and extraordinary figure which he now appears; for his neighbours recollect his being clean-shaven, and habited like other men. He is not a native of Cliff, but came out of Yorkshire to reside there upon obtaining a small estate in that place. He is at present possessed of about £50 per annum in landed property, and is generally supposed to be worth money. There is no doubt of his being deranged; yet, by those who best know him, he is thought a shrewd cunning fellow. A tinker who made his appearance some years ago at Cliff, who was an occasional preacher, first infected the poor man with his enthusiastic delirium; for, with this itinerant apostle he formed a strict intimacy; and the warm imagination of the one being fermented by the canting of the other, Dakin began to fancy himself to be Jesus Christ. His sister, Hannah Falkner, who lived with him, did not escape the contagion; and in their frenzy fits they have not unfrequently run into the water till they were in danger of being drowned, calling on people "to follow the Lamb". Nay, once they proceeded with lighted torches to set fire to a hayrick. Such acts of insanity, however, caused them at last to be taken before a magistrate, who advised their friends to send them to some proper person to be taken care of, and they were accordingly sent to Dr Willis. They were, however, soon liberated; and since that time Dakin has been more reasonable and cautious; not but he still is occasionally possessed with the idea of his being the Saviour.

Some time after he came home from Dr Willis, he cloathed himself in sackcloth, and attended at the parish church for the purpose of receiving the Sacrament. The officiating curate, however, refused him; upon which he made a vow that he would never enter it again, and, in order to have some place for public worship, he built a meeting-place, and procured a preacher to officiate in it. But this lasted only one year; and it is now unconsecrated, and literally metamorphosed into a dove-cote. The sums of money he has distributed at Cliff are incredible; particularly in Lent, when the inhabitants from all the neighbouring villages for miles around would flock to his dwelling. Some were regaled with hot bread, cheese and beer, and others sent back with many admonitions and revilings. This expence he was the better enabled to afford by his strict and unremitting attention to business, which is vending the turner's ware of Cliff (for which it is noted), and the plated goods from Birmingham, and by his farming.

Yet, notwithstanding he pretends to a life of holiness, and a peculiar sanctity of character, his morality, to say the best of it, is very suspicious. Among his disciples there is the wife of John Burrell, a turner, his fellow-townsmen, who has for many years resided with him, regardless of her husband and family, which consists of four sons and a daughter, the eldest about 25, and the youngest about 12 years of age. The occasion of his present perambulation is the death of his sister some months ago, leaving him a property of about £2000, to be distributed to the poor. This sister, in order to keep his vow, he would not suffer to be buried by the clergyman, but interred her himself in his own meeting-house. Her death has much affected him, for he had persuaded himself that neither of them could die; and he has decided to make a year's pilgrimage (as he says) to dispose of her legacy. He set off from Cliff some time ago, travelling South West, accompanied by Mary Burrell. They had three asses laden with wooden-ware, plated goods &c. which, it appears, they sell excessively dear. When asked at what time he should return home, he answered, at Christmas; but he rather thought never, as by Christmas he supposed the world would be at an end. His sister's fate bore so hard upon him, that he has neglected to cultivate his land since that period. The wheat crop indeed was in the ground when she died, and this he has commissioned one John Nutt, of Cliff, to harvest, that, if he returns, he may give it to the poor. The rest of his land is lying useless and uncultivated. His political opinions are dubious; for he has appeared at the head of two or three mobs; one particularly at Oundle when the supplementary militia was balloted for. Cliff is a town not unknown to the world, being many years the abode, if not the birth-place, of the famous William Law. "

But it was not only the Gentleman's Magazine which could inform on William Dakin. The Stamford Mercury of 2nd May 1800 copied an article about him which had appeared in the Reading Mercury of contemporary date:- " A man with a long beard has lately distributed large sums of money to poor persons in Witney; he has since visited the towns of Henley, Wallingford and Reading, on the respective market days. He exhibits great quantities of Tunbridge and hardware for sale; and after the business of the day is over he visits the habitations of the poor, whom he relieves as their necessaries strike him. In Reading alone he is known to have given away 170 guineas. His goods are conveyed from place to place on three asses, and he is accompanied by a woman, whom he calls

his sister, and a little boy. He never sleeps in an house, but pitches his tent in the fields. There are so many different stories in circulation respecting the place of his nativity, and the property he is possessed of, that we deem it improper at present to hazard an opinion as to either of them. - Reading Mercury."

And to that the Stamford Mercury added this note :- "The above description resembles a person of King's Cliffe, in Northamptonshire, who for many years has travelled the country with articles manufactured in wood in that town. The woman who usually travels with him is not his sister, but the wife of another man !!! This immaculate character impiously calls himself Jesus Christ !!!"

No doubt the people of King's Cliffe knew all about Dakin: his properties, his lady friends. We for our part will discover, in due course and with the help of the Stamford Mercury of those times, something about each. But first a small item which shows us just how bold and adventurous Will Dakin could be: from the Stamford Mercury of 24th June, 1814, at the time the crowned heads of Europe had gathered in London to decide what to do with Napoleon Bonaparte: " Mr. Will Dakin, the grotesque figure from Cliffe, who is well known in this town (i.e. Stamford) was in London last week; and under cover of his immense beard, which it is supposed could belong only to someone in the suite of the foreign Princes, obtained ready permission wherever he chose to go. "

Dakin must have been a spectacle in Cliffe of the early 1800's, a ready talking-point, no doubt, and someone who could be relied upon for alms ! But in due course he departed this life, a fact noted in the Mercury of 24th January, 1840: " DIED. At King's Cliffe, on Wednesday last, aged 87, Mr. Wm. Dakin, a remarkable character, well known at neighbouring markets and fairs as a vendor of wooden wares, and particularly as the wearer of an immense beard. He had long been in a declining state of health, but only within a few days of his death would submit to be attended by a medical man. Dakin pretended to have an impression that he should never die, and some persons who paid him annuities (for property he had disposed of for such consideration) began to be of the same opinion! The "last enemy", however, has prevailed over the iron frame of the eccentric, and numbered him with his victims. Amongst the numerous strange habits of Dakin (and some of them not unamiable), he practised almsgiving to the extent of frequently giving away to the necessitous all the clothes from his own person, and he has sometimes been seen almost naked in consequence. He lived in a pretty good house at Cliffe, and for the most part alone. When his wife, and subsequently his sister died, he for some years kept their remains in coffins across the beams in his barn, and similar vagaries distinguished him through his long life, leading many to the opinion that he was not of sane mind, although His judgment of land showed him to have on some points a very clear intellect. A person, understood to be his nephew, whom he has induced to wear a beard like himself and who has frequently been with him, it is thought will succeed to his property, which is considerable. "

To take stock up to this point: we have learned that Dakin was a man of property and land in Cliffe, that he had built himself a chapel in defiance of the Rector and the Parish Church, that he had placed the body of his sister in the rafters of that chapel, possibly also disposed of the body of another woman the same way. That this second person was not a wife we shall learn from the Mercury of the very next week after his death, 31 January 1840: " Mr. Dakin, whose death we noticed last week, is said to have left a very large property to his house-keeper, Mrs. Shaw. He was never married. The person who died after living with him several years ago, and whose remains he kept in his barn, was the wife of another man. " Perhaps that other body was that of the woman who had been his travelling companion, Mary Burrell (properly "Burwell"). Or was it that of his sister Hannah Faulkner? And where was the chapel situated ? Those of us who can remember the coach and wagon building business in Park Street of Messrs. Portess & Son, will remember the plain chapel-like front of the wagon-shop, stood to the right as one entered the prominent yard-gates (these had a wheel set in each gate). This building was last used as his carpentry-shop by the late Aylwin Portess, the craftsman who himself told me the tale of its having been a chapel, also of the "tradition" handed down about two coffins having been found on the rafters when the building was taken over by Charles Stokes. Charles Stokes had, in fact, purchased this property in 1840 from the estate of Will Dakin, to establish there his coach and wagon-building business.

Confirmation of details may perhaps be drawn from an article which appeared in the Peterborough Advertiser of 4th Dec.1909, when " H. E D. " (Harry Elijah Dixon, father of Harry Elijah Dixon II) contributed this information about Dakin and coupled with it a reminiscence of Archdeacon Bonney, then Rector of Cliffe, who would doubtless have been well aware of that eccentric parishioner !

"H.E.D. writes : Your correspondent, in giving an account of the eccentric and philanthropic Will Dakin a few weeks ago, omitted to state the sect to which he belonged 'of what denomination is not known'. He had for a meeting-house and chapel what is now Stokes' big waggon-shop. His sister Hannah Faulkner was buried there for many years, and the body was afterwards taken up and buried in the Churchyard. Your correspondent, who writes so pleasantly of the old Cliffe days, might some time tell us a little about Doctor Bonney, a most benevolent Rector, and also of the Revd. Wm Law, the Divine. The liberality of Dr. Bonney was widely known, and he was very much imposed upon by the weary Willies and tired Tims, who made a practice of always calling upon the Archdeacon. One day a native went to him to borrow money to have all his teeth drawn. "What ! have all your teeth drawn ? What's the matter with them ?", enquired the Doctor. "There's nothing the matter with them," the man replied, "only I've got nothing for them to do." "Hang you", said the Doctor, " Here, go and set them to work". There are plenty more anecdotes of a similar nature, and old folk-lore and ancient customs are always pleasant readings. "

We have learned that this eccentric was a shrewd man of business. Just how much property and land he had acquired we can learn from the Sale Notice which followed on his death. This appeared in the Stamford Mercury of the 7th of February, 1840 :

The auctioneer was Thomas Howes, of King's Cliffe, acting on instructions from Thomas Hipplesley Jackson, solicitor, of Stamford. The sale was described as "Valuable LAND, &c., at King's Cliffe", to be held at the Cross Keys Inn on Monday, 17th February, 1840. Here are the detailed Lots (some details shortened) :

- Lot 1. A Tenement and Garden in Park Street, tenant George Goodwin.
- Lot 2. A Tenement and Garden in Park Street, tenant Thomas Roberts.
- Lot 3. A Tenement with Yard and Garden in Park Street, tenant John Sanders.
- Lot 5. A Tenement with Garden in Park Street, tenant John Arlett.
- Lot 6. A Tenement, adjoining the last in Park Street, tenant Ann Reed.
- Lot 7. A Close of "rich old Pasture Land", in the Park Field, 12 and a half acres, lying between Lands belonging to Mr. Richardson and Mr. Law.
- Lot 8. A Close of Land, part Pasture, part Arable, 5 acres, adjoining the road from Cliffe to Stamford.
- Lot 9. An Allotment of "rich Arable Land", 1 A. 2R. 34P., situate in Wood Green, adjoining King's Sale, in King's Cliffe
- Lot 10. All that other Tenement in Park Street in the occupation of Mrs. Shaw, with the Barn, Stable, and a large Building adjoining the same, lately used as a Dissenting Chapel: and also those two other Tenements near the same, in the occupation of Plowright and Gaudern, with the Yards, Gardens, and Home Close thereto adjoining, containing One acre and a half, as the same is now in the occupation of Mrs. Shaw.

The above estate is Copyhold of the Manor of King's Cliffe, which is fine certain, and equal to Freehold. "

What we learn from this Sale Notice is, first, that Mrs. Shaw was indeed the person who inherited these houses and lands from William Dakin; second, that he had acquired parcels of land in what had been the "open" Park Field of the pre-Inclosure days of King's Cliffe. Third, we learn that Dakin's chapel was indeed situated in Park Street, together with his house, barn and stable property, as delineated in the Inclosure Award Map of 1813.

One wonders also if the 12 and a half acres of Pasture Land mentioned in Lot 7 wasn't an allotment made to Dakin by the Inclosure Award, subsequently divided into Great and Little "Dakins" by the construction of the railway in 1875 to 1879.