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A HIKE FOR HANNAH

A couple of years back I entertained Coastal View readers with an account of the doings of an eccentric (at the very least) 19th century Cleric from Whitby, a guy who took great personal delight in physically opening up pathways in the countryside around Whitby, and generally taking on the rich and powerful landowners in a high-spirited way – indeed on one occasion threatening to murder a fellow cleric critical of his methods, whilst that man was preaching to his flock. That man, the Reverend Haydn Phillips, it now turns out, had a contemporary free spirit in East Cleveland – and amazingly she was an elderly lady in her late 70's.

And a direct descendant of that lady is now telling her story for today's East Clevelanders, and along with others, is planning to recreate a "mass trespass" on roads and paths once blocked by landowners between North Skelton and Saltburn.

Josie Bland, a member of the Skelton History Group, has for the last two years been busy researching her ancestors, the Emmerson family of Hollybush Farm Skelton – now no more (the farm, that is). She firstly discovered that her great-grandfather was born and grew up there, and that it had been in the Emmerson family since at least the 1600s.

Her great-grandfather, one John Emmerson, was raised by his Aunt Hannah and Uncle Stephen, a brother and sister who lived all their lives on the farm. They bravely supported the infant Trade Unions representing local Ironstone Miners and when the Cleveland Miners Association called its first Demonstration Day in 1872, the farm was thrown open to the miners for that meeting, the first of many subsequent ones held at Hollybush Farm. In return, the miners held Stephen and Hannah in high regard. Members of the Emmerson family were always on the top table at the demonstration days – even it they were being held at different venues from the farm. They commissioned a painting of Stephen which they presented to him, and photographs of it were sold at Benjamin Wilde's shop in Skelton High Street (now the present-day Post Office).

In the late Winter of 1879, when Hannah was seventy-five, she went for a walk and, surprisingly found her way blocked by a newly erected fence. Turns out it had been put up to block the long-established path from North Skelton to Saltburn used by the miners and by other Skelton residents. It seems that the Wharton Estate had built a new path to Longacre Mine (near to today's Asda store) for the miners' use and wanted to dissuade them from using the old one.

For the landowners – who had a big stake in the mine – doing this was a win-win. They got a road to the new mine open, and were going to try to block off the old one, so as to stop people walking over their land (and possibly also as a handy access for night-time poachers). Miss Emmerson, it seems, was a very feisty old lady indeed, and instead of knuckling down to the landowners dictat, she simply got one of her farm hands from Hollybush to bring a heavy harnessed horse, tied a rope round the fence, saddled up the horse and pulled it down.

As you can guess, Major Wharton's land agent was, like the reigning Queen Victoria, "not amused" and made it clear that he would be taking court action against both Hannah and her farm worker. At that time, that was a big threat. Unlike today's world with a professional judiciary and with solicitors and barristers able to act for defendants, the courts then were nothing more than a bench made up of the wealthy and powerful – and they would all be men known personally and by business dealings with the Wharton family. A proper legal defence, for an ordinary person was either out of the question, or extraordinarily difficult and expensive.

News travelled fast, and protest meetings were held by the Skelton residents – including many of the miners – to see how best to support Hannah. The first meeting was held in the Bulls Head Pub, North Skelton, and was supported by almost all the villagers, and, crucially, by the local miners. Indeed, one of the key people on the top table at that meeting was Joseph Toyne, the local miners' Trade Union leader. Toyne and the miners were a force to be reckoned with, and could be relied on to give vocal and boisterous support to the elderly and rather frail Hannah.

At that time the Miners Association were flexing their muscles well beyond the normal role of representation of their members before the mine owners, and were now fast becoming an improving and redressing agency for the entire area – putting up candidates for the School Boards, contesting local elections and establishing the new Co-operative stores so as to both feed the community and to re-invest the profits back into that same community. So taking on landowners over access issues was simply more grist to the mill.

The Gazette reported:

"On Friday last (14th November 1879) a meeting at the Bulls Head in North Skelton was held to discuss the actions of Mr Hamilton, the land agent to Mr J T Wharton, Skelton Castle, who for a considerable time has been trying to prevent the public travelling by the fields by Hagg Farm to Saltburn. The meeting, via the people present resolved all they could do to help Miss Emmerson and they decided to contact Mr Hamilton to tell him they intended to walk the path at an early date."

The story was told eloquently by a writer "a concerned reader" (possibly Toyne himself as he was a Methodist lay reader and thus well read by the standards of the time) who addresses an article in the Daily Gazette thus;

Sir,

Some few weeks since I had the pleasure of reading in your valuable paper the report of a meeting held by the inhabitants of North Skelton to consider what steps ought to be taken to prevent the Lord of the Manor stopping a footpath from Holly Farm by the Hagg Farm to Saltburn, which from time immemorial has been used by the inhabitants of Skelton and neighbourhood.

From the report it appeared that some kind of a fence had been put up which entirely blocked the way. This obstruction was taken notice of by Miss Hannah Emmerson, of Holly Farm, who for seventy years has used the road. Miss Emmerson then ordered – and in my opinion rightly too – her servant man to

pull the obstruction down, which was done. Out of this transaction a lawsuit has arisen, and I am informed by the deputation which waited on Mr Wharton that he intends to stop the road and go on with the case.

I have noticed for many years that encroachments on the right of the public are being continually made by gentlemen such as Mr Wharton, and where such occurs it generally comes under the head of improvement. Sir, I have no desire to prevent improvements being made, especially on the land, but I think that this is one of the "improvements" which, the public ought not to allow. That real business is meant is evident by the placing of a notice-board near the Wesleyan Chapel, North Skelton, which denies the right of way to every one besides miners who work at the Longacres mines.

Now, I want to know by which road I am to get from North Skelton to the "Holly" or "Hagg" Farms, or to Saltburn. Our ancestors used to go by a public foot road, off the main road from Skelton to Brotton, the entrance of which is some four or five hundred yards on the Brotton side of the village of North Skelton. This road has not been used of late in consequence of the new road which has been made for the miners who work at Longacres mines being most convenient.

What are the facts? Mr Wharton intends, if possible, to do away with the old public road by making a new private road, which he will have the power to stop when he thinks fit to do so. We hear a great deal nowadays about "preserving our institutions" – but of these very old footpaths – "relics of the past" – we hear scarcely anything. Why, at the rate we are going on in Cleveland, in a few years we shall not be able to go off the turnpike road without trespassing. Where are our "Guardians"? Surely it is a part of their duty to keep intact those public ways for the benefit of the people, and I trust some of them will have courage enough to make the matter a subject for investigation.

The question is one of public against private interest; and if the people who live in the neighbourhood of Skelton allow their lord and master to do what he apparently intends they will prove traitors to their traditions, and be unworthy of their ancestors. I hope to see the people respectfully but earnestly asking that their rights are respected, if not, they may march in a body to assert their right of way over the ancient footpath. By so doing they would put the question to the test, and settle where the right or the power lies.

*Trusting you will find space for this letter, I am, for self and fellow sufferers,
A concerned Reader*

Arising from that meeting, a letter was sent to Mr Wharton's bailiff telling him that there was to be a protest walk in early January 1880 and he was being given prior warning so he could decide on a course of action. The day came when on the afternoon of Saturday 3rd January 1880, 800 plus residents of Skelton met outside the Bulls Head and proceeded to simply and solemnly walk the path. Mr Wharton, his bailiff and farm hands arrived on the scene on horseback. riding up to order the marchers to stop, but they were simply ignored – to loud cheers from the crowd – and the group eventually reached their destination of Saltburn.

In the end, the court summons just seem to fizzle out. My guess is that the Whartons and their land managers, seeing the fuss and the hornet's nest they had stirred up, simply decided to let sleeping dogs go back to sleep and to allow free access. The Lord of the Manor on horseback – the archetypal rural figure of authority in Victorian days had been seen down by his social inferiors. A victory for Hannah, the miners and people power.

On Saturday October 8th 2016 Josie, along with members of the Skelton History Group and anyone else interested, will be re-creating that walk as a reminder of Skelton's Heritage. Josie tells me that everyone is welcome, with a start at 2.00 pm from the Bulls Head.

And strange as you may think, but all this coincides with a latter-day issue of another well used path in the very same area being unilaterally blocked up to the chagrin of local walkers. This path runs – or rather now – “ran” from North Skelton to Hollybush via the allotment gardens and a footbridge over a beck valley. At the end of a footbridge a path, with a section crossing the railway line, carried on to Hollybush, via a small copse. I say “ran” deliberately as – only a few weeks ago – Network Rail closed access across the line as it was not deemed a “Public Right of Way”. According to the local protest leader, Ian Johnson of Skelton, *“the gates are now locked and the old stile removed without any public consultation or prior notification. Closing this path has destroyed a wonderful walk, and I feel that this should be reinstated with provision for walkers who would then still be able to access the woodland, and onto North Skelton, Brotton, Saltburn and other parts of East Cleveland. The villages of Skelton do not have large areas of public parks and it is vital that our local residents are able to enjoy the open countryside instead”*

Not that I would advocate civil disobedience, but it would be interesting to see if some walkers made a quick detour on this new attempt to deny access to the open countryside that Hannah took on – and won – back in 1880.

Hollie Bush