

## 1 Introduction

Major John Fairfax Blakeborough, from Stockton-on-Tees, became a famous local historian and authority on horse racing, although he began his career as a journalist. At the time his book on Great Ayton and Stokesley was published, he was living at Grove House, Norton Road. His father, R Blakeborough, who died 23 April 1918, had collected folk stories from the Cleveland area, and his son used some of this material in the book.

In his address to the reader, Blakeborough says that he is a journalist, and that over the years he has gathered a considerable amount of material from various sources. The result has been this book, which he says took a long time to put together because it was done "at midnight after my day's work". He acknowledges the research of Rev C V Collier M A, for some time Curate at Great Ayton. These are extracts from the book, sometimes paraphrased.

## 2 Extracts from the book

"The main industries the years before 1901 were quarrying for whinstone and farm labouring. As recently as 1820 there were two blacksmiths, three linen manufacturers, three ore melters, three tanneries, one nail manufactory, one saddler, book-keeper, tallow chandler, baker and cooper."

"The village possesses two greens, and the children of the respective portions of the village entertain a sort of rivalry. The *Lowenders* and *Highenders* or *Topenders* would meet in snow fights, football, cricket, and other games."

On the Friends School he wrote:

"This institution, as it has grown in years, has increased in popularity and usefulness, and is now under the head-mastership of Mr F. Rivers Arundel. It is essentially for the children connected with the Society, but when there are vacancies others are admitted. The grounds, to be reached by the 'coach road'. There is a large bath, where swimming is taught; a workshop, a gymnasium, lecture hall, chemical laboratory, and indeed every branch of education which the world now demands is attended to in a manner equalled by few schools of similar character, and I might add surpassed by none. The Schools are lighted with electric light, and ere long the buildings will be much extended.

When the first scholar arrived on the opening of the School, he says, writing since (Blakeborough gives no reference but does put the words in quotation marks):

"The first days were spent, partly in outdoor work on the coach road, and partly in lessons, that were by no means irksome – in fact, we may say, as far as our remembrance goes, under George Dixon's rule, we never seemed to be burdened with out-of-school lessons."

"The most interesting subject was geography, which, as taught by Mr Dixon, was always interesting. The remembrance of those early days is like a pleasing dream, the planting of the box edging on the coach road; the gathering of apples, plums, and other fruit, which was that year most abundant, in the School garden; the visiting occasionally with 'master' most of the Friends houses – the Whites; Sarah Selfe and Hannah Smith; John Fletcher, of Little Ayton; and other Friends, mostly farmers – in the bright and sunny evenings."

It was the first scholars to whom thanks are due for the laying out of the grounds, which were then a mere uneven pasture field, studded with trees. There was no splendid swimming bath as now, an old building which had been formerly used for the bleaching of the linen woven in the cottage homes in the village being utilised as a bath. Water was brought from the High Dykes.

After the first year an assistant teacher had to be obtained.

Blakeborough quotes a member of The Ayton Old Scholars' Association:

I have been led to wonder how the Ayton scholars of the present day would take to the conditions of the place as I found it, now, alas! fifty years ago. How they would take to a turn of pulling and 'snagging' turnips on a cold frosty day when the leaves were coated with ice, or washing carrots, &c., at the old bath house, and making ready 'ropes' of onions for the weekly market at Middlesbrough, or gathering wickens and potatoes, clad in coarse smocks and clogs exposed to a cold northerly wind up in the 'long field,' or hoeing turnips, or spreading manure and doing the general rough work of the farm, or haymaking, &c. Such was some of my time at the School. The food was of a very plain character but substantial – brown bread, without any butter, baked in large flat shaped loaves in a brick oven, together with milk in basins for breakfast and that we called 'supper'. The dinner consisted of one dish. Sunday – Suet pudding decorated with a few raisins and currants, varied during the summer with rhubarb pie slightly sweetened with treacle. Monday – Roast or boiled meat and potatoes. Tuesday – Plain suet pudding, accompanied by a patent sauce, invented by, I believe, Phillipa Butter, the housekeeper; this was composed of flour and water boiled, with a dash of treacle as a sweetener, and on account of its appearance and general consistency, obtained the name of 'Bill Sticker'. Wednesday – Cold meat and potatoes. Thursday – A repetition of Tuesday, often varied with rice pudding, so-called, but not let the modern Aytonian be led away with visions of rice pudding as generally understood; this was rice simply cooked with steam without any milk, &c., to which if we wished we could have some of the aforesaid sauce." Things have, however, greatly altered from this now, and the School cannot be too highly spoken of.

Blakeborough has three pages on Thomas Peart, who bred Cleveland Bays. Around 1860 he was selling pedigree stallions for £100 (equivalent to over £4000 today).

### **3 Reference**

Extracts from Great Ayton, Stokesley & District.  
Past and Present, with a Chapter on Bilsdale and its Hunt  
By John F Blakeborough  
M.N.S. Journalists  
Middlesbrough  
Published by T Woolston, Wilson Street, Middlesbrough, 1901