

A brief history of The Recess by Kenneth Warne, great grandson of John Wright, 'The Cleveland Bard'



The Maycroft family outside "the Recess", 1898

The 'Bard's Recess', or The Recess, as it has now come to be known, is a house standing in its own grounds in Newton Road, in the part of Great Ayton called California. It attracts attention by its unusual design, which includes a number of Victorian-Gothic windows, and viewed from the road, it reminds one of a book standing open with its covers at right angles. The house was built in 1862 by John Wright, 'Bard of Cleveland' for himself and his family – hence its name – and it remained in the possession of the family until 1917 when it was sold to others.

John Wright, his wife, son and two daughters, were all born in Guisborough and they lived there or in Middlesbrough until 1855 when they moved to Great Ayton. John had started his working life as a hairdresser, but he began writing poetry in his spare time, giving up his hairdressing business and was publishing his book of poems by 1847, and it was from the proceeds of the sale of his poetic works that he financed the building of his 'Recess'. His poems were largely of a religious and morally uplifting nature, and these evidently went down well in Victorian times.

The story of the 'Bard's Recess' begins in March 1860, when John Wright himself bought half an acre of Land in Newton Road [then known as Wind Lane] for £100 from an Ayton resident, William Harbottle, with the intention of building a house on it. [Note: A further £100 was paid for land in May of that year, presumably for another half acre. This would tie up with drawings which show that the total plot area at this time was around one acre]. John was born in 1807, so was 53 when he made this purchase.

The building of the house did not start straight away, but John celebrated his purchase at once by composing the following poem 'to consecrate the project':

Consecration of the Cottage

Oh Lord, help me to do thy will, and for thy glory live,
That I may here my work fulfil and praise to Jesus give.
For this grand purpose, I promise to build a house for thee,
And strive to aid the lovely cause of Christian liberty.
Let this be consecrated ground, a holy, happy spot,

Where thy good spirit may be found presiding in the cot.
All ostentatious pomp and pride far from my heart remove,
And let thy spirit here preside in humble faith and love.
My time and talents, health and food, mercy and truth and grace
Are all the purchase of thy blood, and shine in Jesus' face!
The spirit's residue with thee alone is to be found;
Open mine eyes and let me see, my heart is hallowed ground!
Jesus, Thou art the solid rock, the sure foundation stone,
On which to build each golden block, polished by thee alone!

It was not until two years later, in 1862, that John Wright found himself ready to build his 'Recess', and his first step, on 11th February of that year, was to draw up an agreement with a bricklayer, Thomas Glover, for the bricklaying work, which was to be paid for 'by measure', and at the rates specified. The agreement with Thomas Glover ran as follows:

" I, Thomas Glover, propose to build a cottage according to a plan by John Wright at prices stated as follows:

Walling - 10" walls 5s 3d per rood

5" walls 2s 6d per rood

Lath & Plaster walls 2s 4d per rood

Side walls 1s 6d per rood

Square brick flooring 2s 4d per rood

1.5 measure chimney breast & ranges 4s 0d per day

Arches, per foot, for 0s 6d

Wall sinking, 12 feet, for £1 4s 0d

To be completed by 7th May 1862

All openings in plastering and brickwork to be deducted

Signed: Thos. Glover"

A description of the proposed 'cottage' is given in a note recorded by John's 24 year old daughter Elizabeth, in her personal diary, on the evening of the day that the agreement was drawn up:

" 11th February 1862. Mr Glover came this evening and we engaged him to build the cot in a triangular-septangular form, it to be built with three gables in front and seven gothic windows in front; seven rooms in the house, and the front door will go in with thre arches"

John Wright's descendents were always given to understand that John's daughter Elizabeth was actually responsible for the design of the house, and it is interesting to note that her design for the plan referred to above reflects her fascination with the numbers 3 and 7, which had for her an almost mystic significance. Elizabeth had been brought up in a highly religious atmosphere and was a keen bible student. At the age of nine (according to her father) she had already noticed how the numbers 3 and 7 recurred again and again in the Scriptures; she made a special study of this, and by 1862 had written and published a book on the subject entitled: "Revelations: a Concise Compendium and Exposition of the Old and new Testaments, under the Wonderful Figures of Three and Seven". Her description of the plan for the new house shows clearly that the plan was based on her feelings for these two mystic numbers.

John Wright must have kept a close eye on the building of the Recess as the work proceeded, and he kept a daily check on the outlay on both materials and labour. This is evident from entries in his diary notes for the period from March 1862 onwards, which record payments for many items. These include labour for the cutting of foundations, driveways, drains etc, as well as charges for a variety of materials such as stone, rubble, tiles etc, and items such as the two cast iron pillars at the front door (12/6 from Vaughans), ironware – kitchen range etc (£6-8-0) and two iron gates (£4-10-0). £65 was paid to John Harbottle at the start of construction for joinery work, and other amounts were added later for work by Harbottle. It is not possible to gain any clear idea of the total cost of building the Recess from John Wright's notes, as the various entries are very confused.

There is, however, a clear entry for 1st November 1862 relating to the stocking of the garden with trees, shrubs and other plants:

60 larch, 40 spruce, 5 poplars, 1 English yew, 2 Irish yews, 2 cherries, 1 cedar, 1 juniper, 1 golden willow, 2 arbor vitae, 2 horse chestnuts, 2 lilacs, 1 laburnum, 1 pear, 5 plums, 3 hollies, 2 red currants, 150 privet plants, 2 apples. The total cost of these including 1/6 labour was £1-16-0

The stable and coachhouse behind the Recess were built in 1885/6 at a total cost of £41-9-10

By about the middle of 1862, John Wright's funds were running low, and he undertook a journey to London with a supply of his books of poems, seeking both to sell them and also to interest persons in high places in his works. He was obviously very successful in interesting Victorian London in his works, for he was awarded a grant of £100 as a Royal Bounty through Lord Palmerston on the 12th September 1862. This was followed by a grant of £50 later from the same source.

On 12th November 1864, John's daughter Elizabeth, now Mrs David Normington, gave the following description of the Recess in a letter to her brother William in Idaho City, USA:

".....On one half of the land Father bought for the house he has built in California, he grows corn, beans or potatoes for the pigs and themselves. The house stands on the other half, 20 yards from the lane. At the back is a garden of fruit trees, apples, plums pears etc. they are young yet, but by-and-by will form a nice orchard/ In front is a flower garden and shrubbery, with little plantations of fir, poplar and chestnut trees down by the lane. A good coach road leads up to the front door, and strong iron gates open into the lane. The house has two storeys, curiously formed with 3 gables, east, south and south-east. The door is in at an angle, with the south-east staircase window and gable above it. Three Gothic arches form the portico, and there are 7 Gothic windows in front and 7 good rooms inside, besides conveniences. We have planted jasmine, woodbine and roses to grow round the portico, and apricots, plums, cherries and pears to grow round the house walls"

Two years later Elizabeth, with two of her children, was staying with her parents at the Recess and wrote again to William [on 22nd August 1866], singing the praises of the Recess in an effort to persuade him to return home to Yorkshire. Her father had recently bought more land adjacent to and behind the house amounting to about 2 acres. It was harvest time:

".....The cottage looked so pretty with its garden in front and the field of corn almost ready alongside. The house looked so clean and the fire so cosy, the kettle singing and all homely. Oh, how glad I felt to see all the familiar faces and objects, even the old cat and the hens. Father has enlarged his out-buildings last winter and made a good stable and carriage house. He has a fine black pony, as gentle as Sally was, although a bit larger. There's room for a cow and a calf in a stable beside her, and famous lofts for hay and straw. They have a nice little pig too, and Father has bought another field behind the house, so he has plenty of fine pasturage. There's plenty of good grass in it to serve both Polly and a cow.

It is a beautiful morning and we have begun harvesting. Father and mother were up by 2 o'clock this morning keeping the birds off the corn till the harvesters come, and now, as I sit at the window writing, I can see them at work from the east and west windows, and it does look beautiful. There are two stooks up, the men are mowing, the women are gathering, the children band-making, the pony tied up and feeding at the gate, Janey looking on, Father gleaning, Mother (Mrs John Wright) carrying baby John in her arms and 3-year old little Esther trotting after. Such a pretty sight"

A short time later, on 3rd December 1866, Elizabeth wrote to William again in the same strain:

".....The Recess is a nice place and nicely fitted for convenience. When you have got satisfied with money-making, I hope you will return, even if you have a nice little competency, and settle yourself at the Recess and take a wife if you will, or hire a servant and have Aunt Mary for housekeeper. You will have a scullery for dirty work, the kitchen with 3 windows with east, west and south prospects, east on to the hills with the Monument, south to the Broughton Hills and west out into the yard, and as you sit on the sofa enjoying your pipe, you have a view of them all. Then you will have a parlour for visitors and a grand hall and Staircase and Grandmother Boyce's old clock to stand on it, and a nice little room for the servant to sleep in, and another for Aunt Mary and a large one for yourself over the kitchen and a fine library over the parlour with a view out to Roseberry. Outside, there is a nice lawn and flower garden in front and little plantations, and a nice carriage road, and on each side of the gate, a beech tree planted. At the back door, we have a good carriage house awaiting a carriage, a stable and pony, room besides for you cow and calf. And there is a good pigsty for your pigs. The yard contains every convenience and is large enough to turn the carriage round. Then the garden behind those is a nice square, with a bed of strawberries on the west, rasps and rhubarb on the north and a double row of currents and gooseberries round the south and west sides. The sturdy trees are apples, plums and pears round the garden. The middle is left for seeds, and then there are the wall trees: cherries, plums, pears and apricots. The two grass fields bound the south and west of the premises, for the field that grew corn this year is now laid away. Next year, if all is well, it will be meadow. There's too much work in it all for Mother – a little cot at the west of the field would suit her better. How would you like to come and live here?"

William did not feel ready yet to return to England, however, and unfortunately, John Wright himself did not have many years' enjoyment at his Recess. For most of his life he had suffered from epilepsy, and his health suddenly

began to deteriorate, so that in 1869 he had to be removed to hospital at York where he remained until his death in 1882.

After 1869, as Mrs Wright and her daughter Jane-Anne found they were unable to manage the Recess on their own, the house was let for a few years, and the two Wrights went to live near the Normingtons in Stokesley. In 1880, the Recess became the family home again however, when they and the now large Normington family returned to Ayton to live there. At that time, the combined Wright and Normington families numbered 11, so in 1880, conditions must have been somewhat crowded. The numbers diminished over the next few years, however, as the older children left home and old Mrs Wright died.

On 7th March 1883, Elizabeth Normington wrote to her son John, who had joined his uncle in USA. She painted a picture of the family gathered round the fireside, who all send him their greetings: Hetty (ie Esther, 20), putting fancy-work on her chemise, Willie (Hetty's fiancé) working sums for her on the slate, Arthur (13) reading his book, Mary (11) writing poetry, Betsey (6) cleaning her finger nails and 'Bob' (Ethel, 3) begging for her 'boiley' with Aunt and grandmother, dosing over the fire.

[The family] had many happy years together at the Recess until 1887 when the Recess was again let and the remainder of the family returned finally to Stokesley, where David Normington had his watchmaking and newsagents' business. In John Wright's will, when he died in 1882, he left the Recess to his daughter Elizabeth, his son William who was older than Elizabeth having gone to the USA. Elizabeth thought this was not right, however, and refused to accept it. She literally threw the Will into the fire. William therefore inherited the recess and held it until 1886, when he sold it to his nephew, John W Normington for £350. John subsequently transferred it to his father, David Normington, in August 1903, and it was subsequently sold out of the family in 1917.