

BLIND JACK – ROAD BUILDER EXTRAORDINAIRE

On its way to join the River Ure, the River Tutt flows beneath Fishergate just a few yards from the Boroughbridge Visitor Information Centre. The bridge which carries the road was built by a man with no training nor any practical experience in bridge-building. He was also totally blind. This was John Metcalfe, better known throughout his 93 years as Blind Jack.

John Metcalfe was born in Knaresborough to working class parents on 15 August 1717. At the age of six he caught smallpox and, although he survived, the disease left him completely blind.

But young John was obviously a boy of spirit because within a few months he was learning how to find his way about the town and the surrounding countryside. A year or two later he was not only adventuring with his peers, climbing trees, swimming and joining in typical boyish mischief, but was usually the leader. He learned to ride his father's horses and developed a keen interest in hunting and racing.

At thirteen his parents, seeing no other future for him, sent him for music lessons. He showed considerable aptitude for the fiddle, practiced assiduously and was soon proficient enough to play for country dances in Knaresborough and surrounding villages.

When he was 15 he was invited to play for assemblies of the gentry at the Harrogate Long Room. He quickly gained popularity among the county quality and began to receive invitations to play at their country houses – Newby Hall among them. He soon took on an assistant and, as more such work came his way, enlarged his ensemble with two more musicians.

He was now in a position to buy his own horse and could indulge his passion for hunting and racing and also extend his range, for both work and play, further from his home ground.

Twice a week he rode to hounds at Middlethorpe near York and stayed there for six months at the invitation of the master. During that visit he met an eminent musician who offered him free tuition at his home in York. Jack eagerly accepted this offer and took advantage of it on those days when there was no hunting.

Led by the blind

At the end of his extended Middlethorpe visit he rode in to York to say farewell to his musical benefactor before returning to Knaresborough. As he set off for home that evening he passed the George Inn where he was hailed by the landlord who told him he had a gentleman who urgently required a guide to Harrogate. Jack offered his services on the understanding that the gentleman would not be told that his guide was blind. This was agreed and, in the dark, Jack managed to conceal his disability throughout the journey, only disclosing it, to his client's astonishment, when his charge was comfortably ensconced at Harrogate's Royal Oak.

By the time Jack reached the age of 21 he was a well-built 6'11/2" and popular with the ladies. He was particularly taken by Dolly Benson, daughter of the landlord of that same Royal Oak, and she returned his affection. He was, nevertheless, tempted by a young woman of Knaresborough who, when she found she was pregnant, demanded he should make an honest woman of her.

To avoid an unwanted marriage Jack rode to Whitby and there took ship to London where his fiddle and a quickly growing reputation made him as popular in the capital as he had been in Yorkshire. But at winter's end his feet began to itch and he decided that while in the south he should "see" something of the Thames Valley and set off to

follow the river westwards. He explored as far as Reading before thoughts of home and Dolly Benson turned him back towards London and the Great North Road. By dint of his musicianship, he had become acquainted with Colonel Liddell, MP for Berwick-upon-Tweed. As the Colonel made his return journey each May by coach from London to his home, Ravensworth Castle near Newcastle-upon-Tyne, he was in the habit of spending a few weeks in Harrogate.

With the arrival of Spring, and hearing of Jack's intention to return home, the Colonel offered him a seat on his coach. Jack thanked him but declined the offer saying he could travel quicker by foot than the Colonel in his coach with his retinue of 16 servants on horseback – the roads of the day being quite unsuited to wheeled transport.

The two men agreed to meet at a named inn at the end of each day's journey and, sure enough, on five of the six days Jack arrived in time to greet the Colonel and enjoy his hospitality. Jack naturally preceded the Colonel in to Harrogate on the final day and was made ten guineas the richer for doing so – not to mention the money saved on the journey by being the Colonel's guest each night.

A homecoming shock

Home again, Jack was relieved to find he was no longer being pressed by the mother of his child and so could resume his courtship of the landlord's daughter at the Royal Oak. Dolly, however, had meanwhile caught the eye of Anthony Dickinson, son of affluent parents, and much favoured by Dolly's mother.

Whether it was a result of parental pressure, reaction to Jack's absence or his status as a reluctant father – a wedding had been arranged between Dolly and Mr Dickinson to be performed at Knaresborough only two days after Jack's return. On the eve of the wedding Jack was called to the Royal Oak where, to his delight, Dolly confessed she still loved him. Plans were immediately laid and, that night, the couple eloped and were married the following morning.

Each had managed to save a little money so they were able to take a small cottage in Knaresborough. Jack was still much in demand as a musician and he was able to make a little more money by horse trading. He made several attempts to mend fences with Dolly's parents but it was not until the birth of the couple's first child that they were finally welcomed back into the good graces of the Bensons.

Branching out

While continuing to play in inns and country houses and buy and sell horses, Jack now acquired a four-wheel chaise and a one-horse chair with which he ran a "taxi" service in and around Harrogate. Recalling his visit to Whitby he also began buying fish from contacts he had made at the coast and bringing it by pack train – which he led himself – to sell in Harrogate, Leeds and Bradford.

One of the mansions in which Jack Metcalfe had often provided entertainment was that of William Thornton of Thornville. It was this gentleman who, with the coming of the 1745 rebellion, enlisted Jack's help in the recruitment of a company to aid the king. His choice of recruiter was justified when, two days later, 140 men made themselves available, of whom he drafted 64.

Captain Thornton dressed his men in uniforms of blue and buff and with Jack playing a march they set off for Boroughbridge on their way to join the army under General Wade at Newcastle.

In January 1746 almost half of Thornton's men were killed or taken prisoner at Falkirk. Although Thornton himself escaped he was forced to hide for several days and was thought by his remaining men to have been taken. Jack, set off to find his

captain but was himself taken prisoner while Thornton was now on his way back to the English lines.

Perhaps because he was blind, Jack was released after a day or two and was able to make his way to Edinburgh where he was re-united with his captain.

The Duke of Cumberland reached Edinburgh with reinforcements on 30 January and took charge of the army. He marched his troops to Aberdeen where he gave a ball – the music being provided from 6pm to 2am by Jack Metcalfe who pleased the Duke so well that he was given a purse with two guineas.

The rebellion was finally quashed at Culloden Moor on 16 April and Jack and his comrades were able to start the long trek home to Yorkshire. Here Jack resumed his fiddling and his horse-trading, developed his post chaise business and also now set up a carrier's trade in the district.

While in Scotland Jack had taken note of a number of products which he thought might find ready buyers south of the border. In the Spring he journeyed back to Scotland and bought a variety of cotton and worsted articles which, with his extensive acquaintance with the county's gentry, he was able to dispose of with little trouble in Yorkshire.

Smuggling on the side

With his profit he was able to buy horses to sell over the border and so buy more Scottish goods – and not a little contraband (such as rum, brandy and tea) – to bring south.

In 1751 this 18th century entrepreneur began to run a regular stage-wagon service between Knaresborough and York which he himself drove twice a week in the summer and once a week in winter.

By his mid-thirties Blind Jack had already tackled more careers and had more adventures than many a sighted man. On foot and horseback he had explored more of Britain than the majority of his contemporaries. In particular he knew the north country better, by smell and feel, than most sighted natives – which was to stand him in very good stead as he changed direction once more and took a course that was to bring him his greatest fame.

When Parliament passed an Act for the building of a turnpike from Harrogate to Boroughbridge, Jack applied for and won the contract to build the section from just south of Boroughbridge to the village of Ferrensby. To the consternation of many a failed bidder he completed the work well within time and to the great satisfaction of the appointed surveyor.

The first bridge

As he was finishing the road, bids were being solicited for the building of the bridge over the River Tutt at Boroughbridge. The surveyor, the same as for the turnpike, was approached by Jack and agreed to place his proposal for the bridge before the principals who were meeting at the Crown Hotel in the town. Once again Jack won the contract and the bridge was quickly and soundly built.

Jack, who before this had built neither bridge nor road, was now well and truly launched upon his new career and, beginning with roads and bridges in the Harrogate area, gradually spread his reputation and his sphere of operation to Leeds, Skipton, Halifax, Doncaster, Huddersfield and beyond. He was eventually employing four-hundred men and, where his first contracts had earned him hundreds of pounds he was now winning contracts for roads and bridges worth thousands.

While building a section of a new turnpike between Knaresborough and Harrogate Jack developed and successfully tested a new foundation for road-building over marshy ground. He had his men cut great quantities of whin and ling and bind them

with withies in tight bundles. A layer of these bundles was placed in the marsh and another layer was placed over them at right-angles to the first. These were followed by the conventional layers of gravel and stone. The authorities were so pleased with the resulting road – and a bridge built over a small stream known as the Star Beck – that they paid Jack a bonus over and above the agreed fee.

Jack's reputation for building solidly and on time meant that he was frequently the first builder to come to mind – particularly when difficult ground had to be crossed. George Stephenson (at Chat Moss) and a host of other rail and road builders were to adopt Jack's method of dealing with similar terrain.

In 1778, while Jack was road-building in Cheshire, his wife Dolly, who was staying nearby in Stockport with one of her married daughters, died at the age of 61. Jack continued building roads and bridges – and occasionally houses – and he also dabbled in the spinning and weaving industry.

The final years

In 1792, at the age of 75, he decided to retire. He returned to Yorkshire to live with one of his daughters and her husband on their smallholding at Spofforth near Wetherby.

He continued to walk considerable distances and his memory of the roads and lanes of Yorkshire remained remarkable, so he was able to visit many old friends and was welcomed in many great houses. So he passed his last eighteen years. He died at Spofforth on 26 April 1810 in his 93rd year leaving four children, 20 grand-children and 90 great- and great-great-grand-children.

He is buried in the graveyard of All Saints at Spofforth, about halfway along the north wall and about ten yards from it. His viameter (a surveyor's measuring wheel) can be seen in the Castle Museum at Knaresborough. But Blind Jack's real legacy can best be seen on Saddleworth Moor, Bleaklow, Black Hill, Featherbed Moss, Standish Common, Peeling Moss, Standedge and Penniston to mention but a few of his roadbuilding feats. — Ronald Walker