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978-1-108-06454-5 - Personal and Professional Recollections: With an Introduction

by John William Burgon

George Gilbert Scott Edited by G. Gilbert Scott

Excerpt

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SIR GILBERT SCOTT.

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL RECOLLECTIONS, 1864.

CHAPTER I.

My motive in jotting down the following miscellaneous recollections is this:—that a man's children have no means whatever of getting at the particulars of his life up to the time when their own observation and memory begin to avail them, and that they are peculiarly apt to receive mistaken impressions. It is consequently, as it appears to me, the duty of every one who has appeared much before the public to supply this defect from his own memory, and thus to prevent misapprehension.

I was born at the parsonage-house at Gawcott, near Buckingham, on July 13th, 1811. Though my father, like myself, was born in Bucks, I hardly feel that I have in reality any very direct connection with that county, clergymen being so much birds of passage, that the place of their children's birth seems little more than a matter of chance.

My grandfather, the Rev. Thomas Scott, so well known by his commentary on the Bible and other works, was a native of Lincolnshire,

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where his father was a considerable agriculturist. I have not been able to ascertain whether the latter was a native of that county, but as his eldest son¹ took some pains to disclaim connection with families of the same name in his neighbourhood, I infer that such was not the case. He (the father of my grandfather) was born in the time of William III. (1701), and was connected by marriage with the Kelsalls of Kelsall in Cheshire, the representative of which family was about that time vicar of Boston.² His wife was one of the Wayets,³ a very respectable county family. From the arms made use of by my grandfather's family, I gather that they must have sprung from the Scotts of Scott's Hall in Kent, who left Scotland in the thirteenth century.⁴

My mother's family were West Indians. Of the family of her father, Dr. Lynch of the island of Antigua, I know but little, but her maternal grandfather was the possessor, at that time, of a valuable estate known as "Gilbert's Estate."

This family settled at a very early date in Antigua, previous to which they had resided in Devonshire, one of their representatives being Sir Humphrey Gilbert, half-brother and companion-in-arms of Sir Walter Raleigh.

¹ William Scott, of Grimblethorpe Hall, near Louth.—ED.

² Edward Kelsall, Vicar of Boston, 1702—1719. See Mackenzie's edition of Guillim's "Display of Heraldry," p. 68.

³ He married Mary Wayet of Boston. One of her sisters was married to Lancelot Brown, "the omnipotent magician Brown" of Cowper's "Task," Bk. III. The family of Wayet was also settled at Tumbly in Bain, in the same county.—ED.

⁴ One branch of this Kentish family was settled at Rotherham, in Yorkshire, in the reign of Edward I V.—ED.

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My great-grandfather, Nathaniel Gilbert, appears to have been a most excellent man. Living in a century of extreme deadness in religious matters, he was roused to a sense of the shortcomings of his age in this respect either by the preaching or by the writings of Wesley. He consequently joined the Wesleyans at a time when they were not considered as severed from the Church of England. At his request Wesley sent over to Antigua some ministers of his society to instruct the negroes and others, but though the whole family joined the new society, it is clear that Mr. Gilbert did not consider himself otherwise than a member of the Church of England, for he brought up his eldest son as a clergyman. Nor do I recollect even a hint of those members of the family who were living during my childhood (including my grandmother and a great-aunt, Miss Elizabeth Gilbert,) being other than Church people, although the last named treasured up most affectionately her personal recollections of John Wesley himself, and retained through life a strong sympathy with his followers. This family was indirectly connected with several good families in England, among others with that of Lord Northampton, with the Abdy's, and with the Gordons of Stocks. Sir Edward Colebrooke once told me that he was connected with the Gilberts, and Sir Denis Le Marchant also through his marriage, as also Lady Seymour, wife of canon Sir John Seymour, and Sir George Grey.

My father, the Rev. Thomas Scott, was the second son of the well-known commentator. He was born at Weston-Underwood in Bucks, during

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the short period of my grandfather's residence as curate of that village in 1780. My grandfather, about that time, served several churches in that district. The next year he removed to Olney, the former curate of which, John Newton, was his intimate friend; where he was brought a good deal in contact with the poet Cowper, who was his next-door neighbour. I well recollect an old man occasionally calling on us at Gawcott, who had known my grandfather at that early period of his clerical life.

MY NATIVE VILLAGE.

The following notice of my native village, and of some of its inhabitants, its customs, &c., I give merely as a memento of times in which, though not long gone by, there remained much more of old manners than has survived to the present day.

Gawcott is a hamlet of, and situated a mile and a half from, Buckingham. It had had a chapel in former times, as is proved by a field retaining the name of "chapel close," and showing marks of ancient building. How long this had ceased to exist I do not know, probably for some centuries. The absence of a church had its natural consequences, producing a partly heathenish and partly dissenting population. The former of these evils, and perhaps to some degree the latter, was so much felt by one of its inhabitants that he determined on refounding a church in his native village. This excellent person, one John West, was a man of humble origin, who had made what to him was a considerable fortune by the trade

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of a lace-buyer, that is to say, by acting as middle-man between the poor lace-maker and the trader. The difficulties he met with in carrying out his generous project were considerable. I have often heard my father say that after the church was built he had the greatest difficulty in getting it consecrated, and that he at last sent a message to the bishop (Tomline of Lincoln) in these words:—"Tell the bishop that if he won't consecrate it I'll give it to the dissenters,"—a message which had the desired effect. This church or chapel, erected during the first years of the present century, was perhaps as absurdly unecclesiastical a structure as could be conceived. Enclosed between four walls forming a short wide oblong, it had a roof sloping all ways, crowned by a belfry such as one sees over the stables of a country house. The pulpit occupied the middle of the south side, the pews facing it from the north, the east, and the west, and a gallery occupying the north side, in the centre of which were perched the singers and the band of clarionets, bass-viols, &c., by which their performances were accompanied. The font, I well recollect, was a washhand-stand with a white basin! The advowson was placed in the hands of five trustees, all being incumbents of parishes in the neighbourhood, and belonging to the then very scarce Evangelical party. My father was the first "Perpetual Curate." There was at first no parsonage, and he lived for a time in the vicarage at Buckingham (the vicar being non-resident), where my two eldest brothers (and one who died in infancy) were born. He soon,

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however, raised funds for the erection of a parsonage, which, as he had a fancy for planning, he designed himself,—and I must not find fault with my native house. It was close to the church.

My earliest recollections of the church bear upon the digging of the vault for the founder and my sitting in the gallery at his funeral, and seeing it pass the opposite windows. This was in 1814, so that it is a pretty youthful reminiscence, yet though it is my earliest, it does not come to me otherwise than any other, and does not seem by any means like a beginning, showing that though we forget what happened in our early childhood, we nevertheless have no feeling of being incapable of observing and remembering it. Here, for instance, I can recollect who dug the vault, and who took me to church, and I have a full sense of being conscious of who they said Mr. West was, and of the house he had lived in, though I was but three years old.

The inhabitants of Gawcott were a very quaint race. I recollect my father saying that when he first went there to reconnoitre, he found the road to it rendered impassable by a large hole dug across it, in which the inhabitants were engaged in baiting a badger, a promising prelude to an evangelical ministry among them. However he succeeded in bringing the place in due time into a more seemly state as to externals, though the old leaven remained, and a certain amount of poaching and other forms of rural blackguardism still prevailed. There grew up amongst all this, however, a good proportion of really excellent

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people, some of whom had at one time belonged to the previously more normal type.

The neighbourhood of Buckingham is by no means picturesque. It is situated geologically at the junction of the Oxford clay with the lower oolite, and though in other districts the latter rises into high and picturesque hills, such is not the case with this portion of its course. It is a plain, slightly undulated, agricultural country, partly arable, but mainly devoted to dairy farming, butter being the only produce for which it is famous. It is (or rather was) here and there well wooded with oak, is everywhere enclosed, with a good deal of hedge-row timber, sadly disfigured by lopping, and there is usually some more ornamental timber round the villages. The latter, as a rule, retained some traces of the "Great House" the residence of the old proprietor who had in most instances succumbed to the all-absorbing influence of a single family, originally one of their own—the squire-race, but then become the Marquises and subsequently the Dukes of Buckingham, who from their semi-regal seat of Stowe, some four miles from my own humble village, lorded it over the county. An unpicturesque country, denuded of its natural aristocracy, is no doubt very dull and unattractive, yet it possesses some interest in the natural and quaint character of its inhabitants and in its retentiveness of old customs. I have never met with so many odd eccentric characters as in my native village, nor do I suppose that there were, even then, many districts in which old customs were better kept up. Whether they are so still, I know not.

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The cottages were usually of the old thatched type, built of rough stone, or of timber and plaster. The one sitting-room known as "the house" had the old-fashioned chimney-corner, in the sides of which the master and mistress of the family sat, with the wood fire, placed upon bars and bricks, on the floor between them. In the ample chimney over their heads hung the bacon, for the benefit of the smoke, and below it all sorts of utensils for which dryness was to be desired, and high overhead as they sat there the occupants could see the sky through the vertical smoke-shaft. The room was paved with unshapen slabs of stone from the neighbouring quarry or "stone-pit" and the oaken floor timbers showed overhead, though hardly sufficiently so for a tall man to feel his head to be safe. Between one of these timbers and the floor there was placed (where babies were to be found) a vertical post, which revolved on its central axis and from which projected an arm of wood with a circular ring or hoop at its end, so contrived as to open and shut. By passing this about the baby's body the little thing could run round and round at will, while its mother was busied at her household work or at the lace-pillow. The bedroom arrangements I do not recollect, but I do not think they were so defective as those we now so often hear of, and the generality of cottages had a pretty ample garden.

The farmers did not live very differently as to general forms from the cottagers, the difference lying chiefly in the very substantial distinction between abundance and scantiness of fare. They usually lived in the "house" or kitchen, though

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they (and indeed some of the cottagers) had "parlours" which were only used when they had company. In a corner of the "parlour" was usually a smart cupboard called a "bofette."

I have heard my father say that Mr. West, the founder of the church, lived in the same room with his servants, all helping themselves at dinner from a common dish placed in the middle of the round table.

In the midst of this funny population we lived almost as a stranger colony. My father was by education a Londoner, and my mother too, though a West-Indian by birth, had been educated in London, as were also my grandmother and my great-aunt, who resided with us, while our isolation was rather increased, than otherwise, by my father taking seven or eight pupils who came from all parts of the kingdom, and by our mixing very little indeed in local society, though we had numerous friends at a distance, who occasionally visited us. Our few local friends lived in the neighbouring town of Buckingham, and now and then a clergyman was admitted to our acquaintance: most of them, however, shunned us as evangelicals, or as they were then called "methodists."

My recollections of the period of my youth are indeed very curious in this respect, I mean as to the relations which at that time (up to 1830 and later) subsisted between an evangelical clergyman and his family, and the other clerical families around them.

Now be it remembered that my father was in his way very much of a man of the world.

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Having been brought up in town, he had seen a good deal of life in one way or another. He was the farthest possible from being a sanctimonious man, and, though he made religion his primary object and guide, he did not bring it to the front or parade it in the least degree so as to give offence to others. He was, in addition to this, a peculiarly gentlemanly man, ready and well fitted for any society, and as much at home with men of rank as with his equals or inferiors. He was also a man of especially popular manners, more so than almost any man I recollect, thoroughly genial, merry, and courteous in all companies and to all comers.

My mother too was a particularly ladylike person, a hater of all vulgarity, an absolute detester of all low and unworthy motives, and ready to sacrifice any advantage rather than risk any, even the most punctilious, point of honour or high feeling. She was well-born, of a good old family called on the monument of one of them⁶ (a stranger to us) in Petersham church, “generosa et perantiqua familia.”

She was related to persons of good position: her grandfather and uncle were West India planters, (the former, President of the Assembly in his island), whose family had intermarried with baronets, and in one case with a marquis, so that there was no social or personal reason for our not being familiar with our neighbours, but the reverse.

⁶ Thomas Gilbert. He was, says his epitaph, “Integer, probus, severe justus, fidus ad amicos, ad omnes, ad Deum; sine promissis, sine dissimulatione, sine superstitione, firmus, benevolus, pius.” He died in 1766.—ED.