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978-1-108-07074-4 - The Life of Robert Stephenson, F.R.S.: With Descriptive Chapters on Some of his Most Important Professional Works by William Pole: Volume 1

John Cordy Jeaffreson

Excerpt

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THE LIFE
OF
ROBERT STEPHENSON.



CHAPTER I.

THE STEPHENSON FAMILY.

Various Stephensons of Newcastle—'Old Robert Stephenson'—Mabel Carr—George Stephenson's Birth—Fanny Henderson—George Stephenson moves to Willington—Robert Stephenson's Birth—The Christening Party at Willington Quay—Mrs. George Stephenson's delicate Health—George Stephenson removes to Killingworth Township, Long Benton—Site of George Stephenson's House at Willington—'The Stephenson Memorial.'

THE records of Newcastle show that the name of Stephenson has been frequent in every rank of the town for the last two hundred and fifty years. But no attempt has ever been made to establish a family connection between the subject of this memoir and the many worthy citizens of Newcastle who, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, bore the same name. A gentleman of high attainments, residing in the neighbourhood of Newcastle, in answer to enquiries for ancestors

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in the male line of George Stephenson, stated that George Stephenson on a certain occasion said that his family were natives of Castleton, in Liddisdale, and that his grandfather came into England in the service of a Scotch gentleman.

There is no doubt that the grandfather of the greatest engineer of the present century lived and toiled and died in humble circumstances. He worked as fireman to the engines of the various colliery pits in the neighbourhood of Wylam, till an accident deprived him of sight and rendered him dependent on others for his daily bread. Gentle beyond the wont of rude North-countrymen, and fond of spinning out long stories of adventure and romance to village children, he was known as ‘Bob the story-teller.’ He is now remembered by the few of his associates who linger on the earth as ‘Old Robert Stephenson.’ In early life he married Mabel, the daughter of George Carr, a bleacher and dyer of Ovingham, a village standing on an ascent which rises from the north bank of the Tyne, and faces the ancient ruins of Prudhoe Castle, that crown the hill on the opposite bank. The maiden name of Mabel Carr’s mother was Eleanor Wilson. Eleanor was the daughter of a wealthy Northumbrian yeoman, who possessed a good estate in the parishes of Stocksfield and Bywell. Indignant at her marriage with the bleacher and dyer of Ovingham, Mr. Wilson turned his back upon her, and died without bequeathing her a penny.

By his wife Mabel ‘Old Robert Stephenson’ had four sons (James, George, Robert, and John) and two daughters (Eleanor and Ann). James, the eldest son, closely resembled his father; but George, Robert, and

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1801.] EARLY YEARS OF GEORGE STEPHENSON. 3

John, were all shrewd and observant men, self-reliant and resolute.

Born June 9, 1781, George Stephenson could neither write nor read when he had attained the age of eighteen years. Up to that age he displayed no signs of unusual intelligence, but he had always been a good, sober, steady lad. Like most pit-children, he used to grub about in the dirt, and for his amusement fashion models of steam-engines in clay. From his earliest years, also, he kept as pets pigeons, blackbirds, guinea-pigs, and rabbits; an almost universal trait amongst the colliery labourers of the Newcastle field.

In 1801, he became brakesman of the engine of the Dolly Pit, in Black Callerton, and lodged in the house of Thomas Thompson, a small farmer of that parish. George Stephenson was at that time a light-hearted young fellow, famous for practical jokes, and proud of his muscular power. At this period, also, he acquired the art of shoe-cobbling.

The most important farmer of the parish was Mr. Thomas Hindmarsh, who occupied land which his ancestors had farmed for at least two centuries. To his grave displeasure, his daughter Elizabeth accepted the addresses of the young brakesman, giving him clandestine meetings in the orchard and behind the garden-fence, until such effectual measures were taken as prevented a repetition of the suitor's visits. Elizabeth, however, remained faithful to the lover, whom her father drove from his premises, and she eventually became his second, but not his last, wife.

George Stephenson took this disappointment lightly. He soon fixed his affections on Ann Henderson, daughter

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of John Henderson, a small and impoverished farmer, near Capheaton. Like her two sisters Hannah and Frances (who were the female servants in Thomas Thompson's house) Ann was a domestic servant. At first she seemed well pleased with her lover, who, amongst other attentions, paid her one which deserves a few passing words.* Observing that her shoes wanted to be re-soled, he begged leave to mend them, and, the permission being granted, he not only repaired them, but boastfully displayed them to his companions. His triumph, however, was of short duration; for on returning the shoes to Ann, with a request for a warmer acknowledgement of his services than mere thanks, he was informed by her that he wooed where he could never win.

This second rejection was for a time deeply felt, but he concealed his chagrin, and then made up his mind that, since he could not have Ann, he would try his luck with her sister Fanny.

Fanny Henderson had for years been a servant in the house where George Stephenson was a lodger. When Thomas Thompson, more than ten years before, took the farm from the outgoing tenant, George Alder, she came into his service as part of the concern, with the following character: —

* Mr. Pattison, the nephew of Ann Henderson, and son of Elizabeth Henderson (who married Thomas Pattison, a tenant farmer of Black Callerton), writes thus: 'The pair of shoes mentioned in the "Life of George Stephenson," as having been made for Fanny Henderson, afterwards his wife, were not for her, but for her sister Ann, whom he

ardently admired; but not succeeding with her, he said he would have one of the family, and he turned his attention to Fanny.' Mr. Pattison, the author of this statement, is employed in the factory of Messrs. Robert Stephenson and Co., Newcastle. His statement is corroborated by all the members of his mother's respectable family.

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1802.]

MARRIAGE OF GEORGE STEPHENSON.

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Black Callerton : April 10, 1791.

The bearer, Frances Henderson, is a girl of a sober disposition, an honest servant, and of a good family, as witness my hand,

GEORGE ALDER.

She was no longer young, and it was the village gossip that she would never find a husband. As a girl, she had plighted her troth to John Charlton, the village school-master of Black Callerton, but their long engagement was terminated in 1794 by the young man's death, when she was in her twenty-sixth year. She was therefore George's senior by twelve years; but it was not for her to object to the disparity of their ages, since he was willing to marry a woman so much older than himself. So, to the good-natured amusement of neighbours, and to the vexation of Ann Henderson, who did not enjoy the apparent unconcern with which her lover had passed from her to her old maid sister, George Stephenson was married at Newburn church on November 28th, 1802, to Fanny Henderson, the mother of the subject of this memoir.

Mr. Thomas Thompson gave the wedding breakfast to his faithful domestic servant and his young lodger, and signed his name in the parish register, as a witness of the marriage ceremony. George Stephenson had at that time so far advanced in the art of writing, that he was able to sign his own name (and his wife's maiden name also — if handwriting may be trusted as evidence on such a point) on the certificate. The signature is blurred — possibly by the sleeve of his coat, as he stretched out his pen for another dip of ink before acting as his wife's secretary; but the handwriting is legible, and is a good specimen of George Stephenson's caligraphy.

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For a short time after his marriage George Stephenson continued to reside at Black Callerton, lodging with his wife in a cottage not far from the Lough House, as Mr. Thomas Thompson's residence was called. This arrangement, however, did not last long. While he was acting as brakesman at Black Callerton, his father and his brothers James and John continued to work at Walbottle colliery, where the engineer was Robert Hawthorn, the ingenious and enterprising man whose sons still carry on the important locomotive factory at Newcastle that bears their name. At the opening of the present century, Robert Hawthorn, then known as one of the best enginewrights in the Newcastle country, erected the first ballast machine that ever worked on the banks of the Tyne. This machine was erected at Willington Quay (a station on the river side, about six miles below Newcastle), and was placed upon the quay, on the edge of the river.* When the work was completed, Hawthorn exerted his influence in favour of the Dolly Pit brakesman, the consequence of which was, that the latter quitted Black Callerton (situated a few miles above Newcastle), and became the brakesman of the Ballast Hill engine. It was while he held this appointment that George Stephenson first set up as a housekeeper on his own humble account—that is to say, first bought bedding and such modest furniture as he required for

* It has been represented that this machine was placed on the summit of the Ballast Hill. The Messrs. Hawthorn, however (the sons of the contractor), who remember well both the engine and the

incline, say that the former was near the water. 'If,' say these gentlemen, 'the machine had been erected on the open Ballast Hill, it would have been buried up.'

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1803.]

BIRTH OF ROBERT STEPHENSON.

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two rooms in a cottage stationed hard by the engine on Willington Quay. As everything connected with the career of this remarkable man is interesting, it is worthy of mention that at the time of his marriage he had not saved sufficient money to buy the upholstery and fittings of his new home. In marrying Fanny Henderson, however, he had, in a pecuniary sense, bettered himself. When they mounted the horse which Mr. Burn of the Red House farm, Wolsingham, put at their service, and made their progress from their furnished lodgings at Black Callerton to their new domicile on the other side of Newcastle, George had in his pocket a handsome number of gold pieces — the savings of his careful wife during long years of domestic service. A portion of this money was expended on household goods, the rest being laid by against a rainy day.

Marriage made a great difference in George Stephenson, and on settling at Willington he applied himself earnestly to the work of self-education. On October 16th, 1803,* his wife gave birth to a son, who was christened Robert: the ceremony was performed in the Wallsend school-house, as the parish church was unfit for use. The sponsors were Robert Gray and Ann Henderson, but they were by no means the only guests at the christening. Proud of being a father, George called together his kinsmen from the Wylam and Newburn districts, and gave them hospitable entertainment. His father, mother, and brothers answered the summons. So Robert Stephenson was received into the family with

* Robert Stephenson stated that he was born in the month of November, and his birthday was always celebrated at that time; but the extract from the register proves his birth to have been in October.

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all honour, being named, according to north-country fashion, after his grandfather, and having long life and health and success drunk to him in sound ale and Scotch whisky. But the uncles and aunts who were present at the festivities remarked that the babe was ‘a wee sickly bairn not made for long on this earth.’

Delicate the child both was and remained until he had made several years’ entry into manhood. From his father he inherited strong thews and a strong will; but from his mother’s blood there was a taint imparted to what otherwise would have been a magnificent constitution. The disease — consumption — which carried off John Charlton, now made insidious advances on Mrs. Stephenson; and her husband, whilst he was still only two and twenty years old, saw his life darkened by the heaviest misfortune that can befall a poor man — an invalid wife. In this respect his career sadly resembled the lot of his father, and years afterwards it was mournfully reproduced in the experiences of his only son.

But the young father was not the man to crouch at the first blast of adversity. If his wife could not help him, the more reason that he should help himself. He worked steadily at his engine during the appointed hours, and employed his evenings in shoemaking and cobbling and in acquiring the rudiments of mechanics. Whilst he was spelling out the secrets of his books, and often as he worked, hammer in hand, he relieved his sickly wife by taking his son from her cough-racked breast and nursing him for hours together. Robert’s earliest recollections were of sitting on his father’s knee, watching his brows knit over the difficult points of a page, or marking the deftness and precision with which

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1803.] GEORGE STEPHENSON AT WILLINGTON. 9

his right hand plied its craft. The child, too, bore in body as well as heart a memorial of his father's tenderness. His seat was always on George's left knee, his body encircled by his father's left arm. The consequence was that the left hand and arm, left at liberty by the position, became stronger and were more often used than the right; and the child's habit of trusting the left hand, strengthening with time, gradually developed into a permanent defect.

George Stephenson did not remain long at Willington, but his brief residence on the quay side was marked by other incidents besides the birth of his child. It was there that his intercourse with Robert Hawthorn first took the form of personal intimacy. It was at Willington, too, that he first took to clock-mending and clock-cleaning as an additional field of industry. The pit-man's cabin has points by which it may be distinguished from the southern peasant's cottage. Its prominent article of furniture is a good and handsome bed. Not seldom a colliery workman spends ten, or fifteen pounds on his bedstead alone, and when he has bought the costliest he can afford he places it in the middle of his principal apartment. Invariably he has also a clock—usually a valuable one—amongst his possessions. Every village, therefore, abounds in clocks, and as the people are very particular and even fanciful about them, a brisk business is everywhere carried on by clock-cleaners. Each petty district has its own clock-cleaner, who is supported by all the inhabitants; and it is to be observed that this artificer almost invariably has been self-taught.

George Stephenson, therefore, in occupying his spare

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time in cleaning clocks, did only what the superior and more intelligent workmen of his time and country were in the habit of doing. His new employment was lucrative, and enabled him, for the first time in his life, to lay by money out of his own earnings.

Recent circumstances have connected the Stephensons in the public mind with Willington; but their relations with that township were neither lasting nor intimate. Scarcely had George Stephenson formed attachments to his neighbours when he moved to the parish of Long Benton, where he was engaged as brakesman of the West Moor colliery engine. On receiving his new appointment, George, now twenty-three years old, with his wife and little Robert (then in his second year), settled in a cottage in Killingworth township, close to the West Moor colliery—about four or five miles to the north of Newcastle, and about the same distance from Willington Quay.

The cottage in which George Stephenson lived on Willington Quay has been pulled down, but before it was destroyed the public interest attaching to it was so great, that photographic pictures and engravings of it had been circulated in every direction. The site, however, of Robert Stephenson's birthplace is appropriately preserved. Of the objects which arrest the attention of a person making the passage up the river from Tyne-mouth to Newcastle, there is nothing of greater architectural merit than the Gothic edifice that stands out upon Willington Quay. This structure, generally spoken of as the 'Stephenson Memorial,' comprises (besides rooms for officers and teachers) two school-rooms, one for boys and another for girls, and a reading-room