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THE 'WONDERFUL WONDER' OF NORTHCHURCH

Peter The Wild Boy

Some years ago, when I was about to give a talk at Northchurch on local history, one of the organisers of the meeting expressed the hope that I would say nothing about Peter the Wild Boy. "How tiresome it is," she said, "to find an idiot remembered better than anyone else in this parish."

I took the hint, though afterwards I wondered why anyone should wish to turn Peter's face to the wall. Novelists, pamphleteers, journalists, moralists, physicians and scientists were not ashamed of him. Throughout his lifetime and for many years afterwards he excited enormous interest. It is this quite extraordinary public interest, rather than the man himself, which fascinates historians at the present day. The wild boy was in fact a simple, harmless man who, but for an unusual episode in his boyhood, would never have been known beyond his native town or village.

DEFOE AND SWIFT

It was the interest taken in Peter by the Royal Family which made a German waif the talk of London. Famous writers spread his fame throughout the length and breadth of the land. Daniel Defoe, in 1726, wrote a pamphlet giving an account of the wild boy's early life, and Dean Swift referred to him in a satire entitled "It cannot rain but it pours; or London strow'd with rarities". Peter almost certainly gave the author of "Gulliver's Travels" some ideas for his Yahoos.

"The Most Wonderful Wonder that ever appeared to the Wonder of the British Nation" was the title of another early pamphlet. Peter figured in countless other publications, and only thirty years ago a novel by Miss C. M. Tennant, entitled "Peter the Wild Boy," was published. It was largely based on fact.

Peter was a popular subject of artists, too. A portrait by William Kent, I believe, may still be seen at Kensington Palace. A remarkable collection of portraits of Peter, some of high quality, is exhibited in the reading room of the Berkhamsted Institute. "His Iffezy is to be seen now att ye Strand in Wax Work in London," wrote a diarist of 1744.

No less interesting is the fact that Peter was visited by noted philosophers and scientists. He was the basis, or at any rate one of the props, of an hypo-

thesis which in some ways anticipated the work of Darwin by nearly a century.

Only in the age of wireless and television has interest in Peter declined. Middle-aged and elderly folk remember that he was still a popular topic of conversation thirty or forty years ago. Our elders and betters spoke almost as if they had known Peter, and we may be sure the tales they told were passed on by word of mouth from forebears who were his contemporaries. Mr. "Tommy" Tompkins, for instance, learnt in boyhood that his great-great-grandfather had seen Peter carrying children on his broad shoulders. I like this story, for it shows Peter in a kindly light. A really wild man would not have been allowed to play with children.

HOW PETER WAS FOUND

It was in July, 1725, when a farmer found a black-haired, sun-tanned boy, apparently about twelve years of age, in a field near the Pied Piper's town of Hamelin. He was naked but for tattered remnants of a shirt around his neck. The boy was sucking a cow when he sighted the farmer and started running away. But two apples held at arm's length enticed him into the town, and he was placed in a hospital at Zell and named Peter. He was never given a surname.

How long had the waif lived in the forest, feeding on buds, acorns, roots and fruit? The tattered shirt proved nothing beyond the fact that once he had enjoyed home life.

"Enjoyed," perhaps, is the wrong word. His parents were never traced, but it is believed that he was the son of a widower of Luchtringen. In 1723 the son wandered off into the woods, lost his way, and did not return home for some days. In the meantime his father remarried, and as his stepmother refused to have the boy in the house he wandered back into the forest. Fishermen on the Weser had seen a poor, naked lad from time to time on the river bank and given him food. He had never been heard to speak, and was almost certainly the waif who was eventually taken to the hospita at Zell.

BID FOR FREEDOM

It was soon obvious that Peter was not a normal boy. The power of speech, if he had ever possessed it, had been lost. He grunted, however, and was said to rest, animal-fashion, on his knees and

elbows. Sometimes he tried to regain freedom by climbing out of the window and eluding his keeper by shinning up trees with the agility of a squirrel. He disliked wearing clothes and shoes and preferred to walk bare-footed. A favourite pastime was throwing his cap into the Weser and watching it drift away towards the North Sea. Many a normal boy has thrown his cap away, however! Physically, Peter had but one abnormality; two fingers of the left hand were webbed up to the middle joint.

GUEST OF GEORGE I

Imaginative folk began wondering whether Peter was not only "not all there" but not human. Stories of his antics and escapades, some highly coloured, were soon circulating far beyond Zell and Hamelin, and reached the city of Hanover when George I was there in November, 1725. He ordered the boy to be taken to him, and the presentation was made while the King was at dinner. Peter rejected food until offered raw meat; this he devoured with relish. He was taken back to Zell and again escaped from the hospital. The woods were searched and he was found hiding in a tree. The boy's great strength enabled him to push his pursuers down as they attempted to climb the tree, and as a last resource they sawed down the tree. It fell without harming the boy, who was once more captured.

BROUGHT TO ENGLAND

On December 14, 1725, the *St. James's Evening Post* published the following report from its Hanover correspondent: "The intendant of the house of correction

at Zell has brought a boy to Hanover, supposed to be about 15 years of age, who was found some time ago in a wood near Hamelin, some 20 miles hence. He was walking on his hands and feet, climbing up trees like a squirrel, and feeding upon grass and moss of trees."

This was the first of many highly coloured reports to appear in the English press. But really sensational reporting did not start until the early months of 1726, when George I returned to England, bringing Peter with him—by direction, according to one account, of the Princess of Wales, soon to become Queen Caroline.

She induced the learned Dr. Arbuthnot to take charge of the boy, and at his house he came under the notice of Dean Swift, who, on April 26, 1726, wrote to a friend: "This night I saw the wild boy, whose arrival here hath been the subject of half our talk this fortnight."

AT BOARDING SCHOOL

Until the novelty wore off the Court was delighted with its unusual pet. Royal servants, however, did not share the delight, and there must have been rejoicing when Peter was sent to Harrow—not to the famous school, but to a boarding house for boys kept by a Mrs. King. Among his fellow boarders were Samuel Parr and William Jones, destined to become two of the ablest scholars of their day. They had to share the company of an uncouth lad who wandered around eating onions as though they were apples!

Peter's activities in this district will be related in next month's *Review*.

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The compensation to be paid to the owner in respect of the compulsory purchase, under the Slum Clearance Act, of five houses in River Terrace is £1,100, plus surveyor's and legal charges which will bring the amount for which the Urban Council are applying for a loan to £1,194 5s.

For better illumination of a dangerous corner, the Urban Council have authorised the erection of an electric street lamp at the junction of King's Road and Charles Street in place of the existing gas lamp near that point.

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