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THE 'WONDERFUL WONDER' OF NORTHCHURCH (2)

A Wild Man in the Parish

(Last month's article told the story of Peter the Wild Boy's early life in Germany and his arrival in this country at the behest of the Royal Family in 1726.)

A brass memorial tablet in St. Mary's, Northchurch, tells us that the ablest masters were provided for Peter, "but proving incapable of speaking or of receiving instruction, a comfortable provision was made for him by Her Majesty at a farmhouse in this Parish, where he continued to the end of his inoffensive life."

Peter's arrival in this district was due to the friendship of Mrs. Tichborne, one of the Queen's bedchamber women, with Mr. and Mrs. James Fenn, of Haxters End Farm. The boy had been entrusted to the care of Mrs. Tichborne, and on one of her visits to Haxters End she arranged for him to remain at the farm, Mr. Fenn receiving an allowance of £35 a year from the Crown.

FAMILIAR FIGURE

The much-publicised wild boy developed into a robust, muscular, bearded man. He was given complete freedom and soon became a familiar figure. Visitors were taken to see him in much the same way as we would now take our guests to Whipsnade.

People who expected to see someone scarcely recognisable as a human being must have been disappointed; there was nothing extraordinary about Peter's appearance. He may have been an idiot—but what a lucky idiot! He had a good home, good clothes, an indulgent guardian, and was not required to work. Many a sane, honest man had to work hard for less than £35 a year, but if anyone believed that public money was being spent unjustly on an idiot, and a foreign one at that, he kept his thoughts to himself.

ARRESTED AS A SPY

Peter may have been inoffensive, as the memorial tablet claims, but his very low standard of intelligence, in particular his lack of a sense of direction, caused Mr. Fenn a good deal of anxiety. The woods always attracted Peter, and he sometimes wandered far from home, walking or running up to seventy miles a day.

In 1745, it is said, Peter wandered afar and was arrested on suspicion of being a spy for the Pretender; his inability to

explain that he was the celebrated wild boy apparently convinced his captors that he was a wild Highlander. On another occasion, according to the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1751, Peter wandered as far as Norfolk and was imprisoned in Norwich Bridewell as a sturdy vagrant. Fire broke out in the prison and Peter enjoyed the spectacle so much that he was reluctant to be rescued from the blazing building.

Thereafter it was thought undesirable for Peter to wander at will with no means of establishing his identity. Mr. Fenn made him wear a heavy leather collar with a brass ring bearing the inscription: "Peter, the Wild Man from Hanover. Whoever will bring him to Mr. Fenn at Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, shall be paid for their trouble."

This collar is preserved at Berkhamsted School with another interesting relic: the lower portion of a petition to the King from Mr. Fenn for a larger allowance in view of the expense of advertising for Peter and returning him when he wandered far from home. This petition, signed by several of Mr. Fenn's neighbours, came into the possession many years ago of Major T. H. C. Hopkins, to whom I am indebted for much of the material in these two articles.

COMMAND PERFORMANCE

For thirty years Peter stayed at Haxters End; then, on the death of the farmer, he moved to Broadway Farm and his new guardian was Thomas, James Fenn's brother. When Thomas Fenn died, Peter stayed on at Broadway with Farmer Brill.

That Peter was once taken to London, by Royal command, shows that he was not completely forgotten by the Royal Family. For this visit he was shaved and dressed in the livery of the King's servants. He must have looked less like a wild man than ever before.

Lords and commoners, if they wished to see Peter, had to call at the farm. He received a stream of visitors, including the distinguished philosopher Lord Monboddo, who found Peter useful to support an hypothesis that "man in a state of nature is a mere animal without the use of fire, raiment and even speech."

Peter was, in fact, able to utter a few words, and the farmer and his wife put him through a ritual to show his powers of speech and understanding to visitors.

The first question was invariably "Who is your father?" and to this Peter answered, "Ki Sho" (King George). "What is your name?" was answered by "Pe-ter." Childlike, he called a dog "Bow-wow," and every horse was "Cuckow," presumably because that was the name of a horse he had learnt in his younger days.

SINGING AND DANCING

He could sing "Nancy Dawson" and one other song, and could often hum a tune after hearing it but once. On hearing music he clapped his hands, threw his head about in a wild, frantic manner, and sometimes danced until he was exhausted. Visitors often gave him money, and immediately he would pass on the coins to his keepers—"which I suppose is a lesson they have taught him," commented a visitor. This perhaps explains why his guardians were never reluctant to receive callers!

Some accounts say that Peter was never mischievous, others that he would sometimes tear his bedclothes to pieces and run threateningly after people who teased him. He was sullen at the approach of bad weather, but in the spring was "particularly animated." Indoors, he loved a roaring fire, even in midsummer, and acquired a liking for beer and spirits. He occasionally visited a gin-shop at Berkhamsted, "where the people treated him." He hated physic unless it was liberally flavoured with gin, and could not bear the sight of an apothecary who had attended him.

Peter sometimes helped the farmer, and it is said that while assisting his master to fill a dung-cart he was left

alone to finish the work. Soon the cart was filled, but Peter was determined to keep on working, so he started emptying the cart, and could not understand why the farmer was displeased on finding all the work undone!

This story may or may not be true. Gossipers and jokers no doubt made up a few tales to amuse themselves and to give visitors a few more things to talk and write about. The then headmaster of Berkhamsted School, the Rev. Thomas Bland, was so incensed by "men of some eminence in the literary world [who] have in their works published strange opinions and ill-founded conjectures" about Peter that he contributed his own "true account" to a parish register.

A SENSIBLE SAVAGE

Three years before his death a visitor said that Peter, although about seventy years of age, still had "a fresh, healthy look. He wears his beard; his face is not at all ugly or disagreeable, and he has a look that may be called sensible for a savage."

In his old age Peter seldom left the farmhouse, and his devotion to his keepers increased. When one of them died he refused all food and pined away, dying at the age of about seventy-two. He was buried at Northchurch at the expense of the Government, and the brass memorial tablet in St. Mary's Church was also paid for by the Treasury.

A book published in early Victorian days, *Railroadiana*, states that Peter's funeral was "by order similar to that of a respectable tradesman." One of the pall-bearers, John Page, the famous

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"mine host" of the King's Arms Hotel, remembered a strange incident after Peter's death, when a man who said he had come from Hanover asked for the corpse to be exhumed. Permission was not granted, but it was suspected that he did not leave until he had secured Peter's head.

'BEORCHAM'

The sum of £33 3s. 4d. was sent to the Additional Curates Society during 1960 from the parish of Berkhamsted St. Peter and All Saints', states Mrs. Winifred Crook, the parish hon. secretary.

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