

The Story of John Cobb (*Continued*)

A VICTORIAN RECTOR'S TRAVELS

By 'BEORCHAM'

HAVING STARTED a parish magazine in July 1872, the Rev. John Cobb added to the variety of the contents by contributing a number of articles on his travels abroad.

Cook's tours had already extended to the Continent, but Mr. and Mrs. Cobb preferred to make their own arrangements. There was no travel agent to blame when they arrived at Amalfi and found the inn full. The Cobbs were 'well content with improvised beds in the *salle-à-manger*, and set out the following day to see the Greek ruins at Paestum, thankful that troops patrolled the whole route and kept brigands at bay.

'Somehow or another the more one sees of foreign parts, the more one loves England and one's English home', wrote Cobb. But he kept on going abroad for holidays, never giving a hint that long

journeys by train, boat and diligence were tiresome. He spent a holiday in the Loire valley, another in the Basque country, another in Austria, where shooting the rapids in a salt-boat provided the heading for another travel article.

OUR 'WRETCHED' STATION

The most surprising tour of all is described in the September 1872 issue. The Cobbs visited the trouble spots of France only a short time after the Franco-Prussian war; they even went to Alsace-Lorraine, travelling in trains which puffed slowly over bridges that had not been properly repaired. Thousands of people who had elected to remain French were packing up and hurrying over the new frontier to France.

Tucked away in an article on the tour of France is an item of local interest. Cobb wrote: 'We stop at a dirty wood station (somewhat similar to our own present wretched erection on the up line) and the porters cry: 'Sedan'!—a blackened mass of ruins'. Our railway station at the end of Castle Street must have been in a sorry state for Cobb to make such a devastating comment; but three years later, when the present station was opened, the 'wretched erection' was no longer used.

'Poor Metz!' Cobb exclaimed. 'The people were beginning to leave it when we were there. It wore a deserted look. We got a fair dinner certainly, but that was because several officers of the Prussian garrison dined there also. We left by train and soon saw reminiscences enough of the battle-shattered houses and mounds, each with its little cross. The railway, however, does not give much time for meditation . . . you cannot help thinking of the havoc war must have made'.

ENGLAND, MY ENGLAND!

The Cobbs moved on to Paris and St. Cloud and were shocked by 'the astounding frivolity—to give it no harder name—which . . . almost led one to think that the lesson had been in vain. Do not, however, let us condemn others. Do not let us say, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not a Frenchman'. What then? Well, we may say, and ought to feel, and never more heartily than when we have re-

turned from a tour in foreign parts—
“Thank God my home is in England,
may He make me thankful for it as I
ought to be”.

Other local writers contributed articles
on their visits to Cyprus, the Holy
Land, and, of all places, Pitcairn Island.
Going through early numbers I some-
times wondered whether I was reading
the *Geographical Magazine*. An espe-
cially interesting article by Mr. Cobb’s
brother, a solicitor, describes a canoeing
holiday in Scotland; the family party
took folding camp-beds and hair
mattresses.

SCHOOL TREAT

The travel articles may not be very
relevant to my subject, John Cobb, but
they reveal a little more about his
character, thoughts, and varied in-
terests. Finding first-hand reminiscences
of Cobb is now almost impossible; a
nonagenarian would have only early
childhood memories of the rector, but
a reader has contributed the following
interesting letter:

‘My mother attended the Church day
school and also the Sunday school. How
well she remembered the visits of the
rector, Mr. Cobb, when amid an awful
silence in the school he read out the
“black list”—that is the list of those
who had not made enough attendances
to go to the school treat. Usually there
was an assembly of the scholars and
then a march through the town, each
scholar having a mug threaded on a
piece of tape hung round the neck’.

TWO EDITIONS

Of course, Cobb will be remembered
as long as a copy survives of his *History
and Antiquities of Berkhamsted*. One
thousand copies were printed of the first
edition (1855). The printer’s bill of
£46 10s., exclusive of binding, was met
by the profits of a fete held in the Castle
grounds. It took about 25 years to sell
all the copies; the whole cost was re-
turned with a profit of £28 10s.

In January, 1883, the Mechanics’
Institute, to which Cobb gave the copy-
right, asked if he would authorise a

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second edition. Cobb consented, provided additional appendices, and made a few alterations to the text. To defray the cost of publication the Institute suggested sending out a circular soliciting subscriptions; Cobb opposed this suggestion, but relented when it was proposed that a private letter be sent to a few ladies and gentlemen, who responded generously. The cost of printing 1,000 copies of a 148 page book, exclusive of binding, was £50 14s., and despite the fact that it was printed on better paper than the first edition of 96 pages, there was criticism of the increase in price from the £46 10s. charged in 1855. Cobb supplied 300 copies of his portrait gratuitously, and the whole edition was sold out by the early 1930s.

THE TOWN'S LOSS

The author probably never saw a bound copy of his second edition. Towards the end of May 1883, he was taken ill. The book appeared in the shops a few days before his death from pneumonia on 7th June. He was 54 years old.

On Sunday, 10th June, the church was crowded for the morning service. The rector's stall was vacant but on it were a cross and crown composed of white flowers. In the congregation was the Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone, who was staying at Berkhamsted Place.

The funeral took place on Monday, 11th June, and the *Berkhamsted Times* reported that the pulse of pleasure was stopped. There was a total cessation of business. Twenty-five clergymen were at the service, and the floral offerings were without precedent.

The black-bordered Parish Magazine said: 'We may in reverence say his light shone before men. Not the twilight of enfeebled age, for he had not entered into it; not the declining light of passing manhood; not the full light only of that meridian life which shone through the years of his work as rector . . . but with and beyond this, there has been, with a brief exception, the light of a life spent in coming in and going out amongst us, from the first day he entered on his diaconate in our church some thirty years since, to the last day on which he officiated in it as the chief pastor of the parish he loved, and served, so well.'

MEMORIAL FUND

A few weeks after his death, a presentation of a pony carriage was made jointly to Mrs. Cobb and Miss Mann, who was probably a relative or a companion, on their leaving the town. Then, towards the end of 1883, a meeting was held with Earl Brownlow in the chair to open the Cobb Memorial Fund; this raised over £300 for redecorating the chancel in memory of one of Berkhamsted's greatest rectors.

Some nine months before he died, Cobb acquired a new curate, Arthur Johnson. He was the next rector, and was instituted in December 1883.