

Robert Dodd: Poet and Soldier

According to his gravestone in the churchyard at Ninebanks, Robert Dodd was born at Grasslewell Row, Mohope in the West Allen valley, on June 20th 1823. He died at Haydon Bridge on September 22nd 1909, aged 86 years. As both a poet and a soldier, the gravestone hints, however, at a life fully lived between those dates.

Early Days

Grasslewell Row is now called Kiersleywell Row. The family home, now a ruin, was near Redheugh, Mohope, where Isaac Holden of Tea Trail fame was born (see “The Holden Connection,” below). The current Youth Hostel at Mohope is only yards from where Robert lived with his family as a child. The Youth Hostel itself was the home and office of the Kiersleywell mine manager, while the miners’ bunk house was next door. The mine was owned by the Beaumont family and was worked from 1729-1878 – like many mines in the area it was finally closed due largely to cheaper imports undercutting the local price for lead.¹

Robert was his parents’ youngest child. His father, John Dodd, was some 47 years old when Robert was born. John worked in the Kiersleywell lead mine at Mohope, and also ran the family’s smallholding – as did many miners in the Allen Valleys at the time. Robert’s mother, Sarah, also worked for the mine, leading the packhorses laden with lead ore across the valley to the smelt mill.² She was some 15 years younger than her husband, according to the 1841 census.³

The 1841 census has Robert, at 15 years, still living with his family. Typically, he is shown as employed as a ‘lead ore miner.’ Children, like Robert, started working in the Kiersleywell mine when they were as young as eight years, usually once they had left Ninebanks School. Perhaps atypically his brother, Thomas, at 30 years, is shown as a ‘Police Officer’ – he worked in Allendale Town, over in the East Allen valley.⁴ Robert’s father, John, is listed as 65 years old in 1841, and had presumably retired from mining; the census gives his employment as ‘agricultural labourer.’ Robert’s mother, Sarah is shown as 50 years old in 1841. Robert’s sister, Sarah, is listed, so was still living at home at 20 years. A 9 month old baby called John is listed as also living with the family at this time. It is likely that this baby was Sarah’s, born out of wedlock.⁵

The Holden Connection

Robert had another sister, Ann, who was not living at home at the time of the 1841 census. She was married to Jonathan Holden, from Nenthead. They were strict Wesleyans. The family home was at Redheugh, Mohope. Their children, and Robert’s nephews and nieces, were John, Tom,

¹ Michael Chaplin, “The Rover” in *Northumberland Time and Place*, (Hexham: Hexham Book Festival Residency Programme, 2015).

² Ibid.

³ Census for West Allen, (Parish of West Allendale, Westallen Low Division, 1841), Book33 Folio 54, p. 9. Note it is likely ages were rounded to the nearest 5 years.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Sarah, Isaac, Jonathan (Jont) and Hannah.⁶ While Sarah and Hannah eventually went into service,⁷ little else is known about family members except Isaac, whose life is well documented.

Briefly, Isaac Holden was born in 1804 and after working in the mine at Kiersleywell, became a tea pedlar. As his route to his customers took him throughout the hills and moors of the North Pennines, he was able to take the opportunity to raise funds by selling his poems, religious tracts, and his own portrait, along with the tea. This proved a money spinner, and he became something of a local celebrity; his picture 'was to be seen in every house.'⁸ He used the funds raised in this way during his tea round to pioneer various philanthropic projects locally, such as the Clothing Club and the Penny Bank. To keep the 'Holden Hearse' he also had the Hearse House at Ninebanks built, which he presented to the community in 1856. This was his last generous act, for he died the following year, in 1857.⁹ The hearse house was restored in 2016 and his tea selling route is now a circular, 36 mile (58 km) long distance path, called 'Isaac's Tea Trail.' There is a commemorative memorial to Isaac Holden in St Cuthbert's churchyard in Allendale, which was funded by public subscription, and Joseph's Well in Allendale also stands as a monument to him, with water appropriately freely available to make tea.¹⁰

Ann Holden was widowed in the 1840s. At this time she was living in Ninebanks near the Temperance Hotel, in a house behind the Peel Tower. She was forced to rely on parish relief to support herself and her children, despite the fact that another member of the Holden family, another Isaac, was a textile millionaire and a Yorkshire MP. To help make ends meet, Ann undertook fieldwork, such as hoeing turnips and cutting hay. She cared for her (and Robert's) father, John Dodd (Jooany), into his 90s. According to Rev. Joseph Ritson, she was a 'freakish looking Wesleyan' as she went about her business in Ninebanks. She moved to live in Haydon Bridge when the Temperance Hotel and her house were pulled down.¹¹

Robert's Travels

By 1842, and at only some 16 years of age, Robert had left the West Allen valley and begun his travels and adventures abroad. According to Ritson's poem, "The Rover," Robert's 'roving spirit' first took him to the Wild West, where 'buffalo ranged the prairie wide' and were 'massed as dense and thick as clover.' The poem gives an account of an incident when Robert witnessed hundreds of buffalo stampeding over an unseen precipice to their deaths.¹²

As his gravestone states, Robert fought with the Union Army against the Confederates in The American Civil War (1861-1865).

*He was a soldier in the army
of the United States
In the time of the Rebellion*

⁶ Rev. Joseph Ritson, *Reminiscences of Allendale*, (Hexham: *The Hexham Courant*, 1930), p. 171.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 261

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.171

⁹ Wikipedia, accessed 15.2.17

¹⁰ Ritson, p. 171

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 260-262

¹² Rev. Joseph Ritson, "The Rover" (publication details unknown), ll. 27-46.

Next, he turned to gold digging – first in Ballarat, Victoria, Australia, then California.

*In Ballarat he dug for gold,
Then joined the rush with young and old
To California's sunny land
Where nugget flashed in golden sand.¹³*

Finally, he travelled to New Zealand, where he turned to farming. It was here that he was able to invest £500 to secure an annual income of £50 until his death. The details of the investment are unclear, but the transaction is mentioned in "The Rover":

*Cleverly to his closing day
A Colony he made to pay
A yearly sum of fifty pounds,
Which after all one quite astounds
...
For just five hundred pounds he bought
The fifty pounds a year he sought,
To meet for his remaining days
His simple wants and frugal ways:
So it did till over eighty,--
Sharp of wit and brain too weighty, --
This soft and simple Ninebanks man
For any ruling Southern clan;
Thirty years he drew his money,
Lived for him on milk and honey.¹⁴*

For all Robert's achievements, and given the number of lines devoted to it, it is almost as if Ritson finds his financial acumen one of the most admirable.

Robert's Return

Robert returned to Northumberland some 40 years after he had left on his travels. He lodged at the General Havelock Inn in Haydon Bridge, at least initially.¹⁵ He never married and always lived alone, without any housekeeper or companion.¹⁶

It was at this time that he took up writing. Since he called himself a poet on his gravestone, he must have been proud of his works. Ritson lists some of them in "The Rover":

*He ranged o'er subjects deep and vast
Like "Colonising in the Past,"
"The World and Man's Future State."¹⁷*

¹³ Ibid., ll. 49-52.

¹⁴ Ibid., ll. 9-12 & ll. 54-64

¹⁵ Ritson, p. 172

¹⁶ Ritson, "The Rover," l. 101 & ll. 111-113

¹⁷ Ibid. ll. 69-71

Ritson gives accounts of meeting up with Jont, Robert's nephew, who showed him Robert's books, then in his possession. Of Robert's work, "Among the Poems," Ritson says the 'author had no belief in hell-fire and rhymed copiously of both eternity and time.' Given that Ritson was a preacher in the Primitive Methodist church, no doubt this religious stance would not have sat well with him. He goes on to say that his 'impression of his poetic gifts was not favourable.'¹⁸

Roving Curtailed

When he was 84 years old, Robert amputated his own big toe with a pocket knife. Until then, he was still very active and often walked for miles over the moors. On this occasion, he walked some 19 miles before finding himself lost, and forced to spend a cold winter's night on the moor.

*This wilful man would have his way
And wandered till the break of day;
But by a miracle survived.¹⁹*

His toe became inflamed from exposure and the resulting infection from his amputation subsequently spread up into his leg. He was admitted to hospital in Newcastle where his leg was amputated, Even then, after only three days he insisted on returning home to Haydon Bridge.²⁰

Job's Tears

In his *Reminiscences of Allendale*, Ritson gives a fairly lengthy account of one particular meeting with Robert's nephew and Isaac Holden's brother, Jonathan, known as Jont.

Jont told Ritson the story of Robert asking his to fetch specimens of the plant, Job's Tears, from Mount Ascension on St. Helena. Jont was not initially convinced that this was anything but an old man's whim:

*Thinking the old man's wits were lost,
And so he'd not retain at most
This latest craze beyond two days;
But Dodd was set in all his ways²¹*

It seemed Robert wanted to try to grow the plant in Northumberland to feed livestock, since he knew sheep and goats on St Helena thrived on it. Jont asked Ritson if he knew anything about the plant when they met. He even sought advice at Kew Garden in London, but the experts there were unable to tell him how to find the plant.²²

¹⁸ Ritson, p.172

¹⁹ Ritson, "The Rover"

²⁰ Ritson, p.173

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ritson, "The Rover"

Robert gave Jont a £30 advance for his passage and undertook to pay the rest of his expenses once the total sum was known.²³ Jont found he was unable to go ashore himself at St Helena, however, as it was a military station at the time. He managed to persuade an officer on a steamer going into shore to collect some of the turf and seeds for him. Jont sent these up to Robert from Southampton when he docked, but he heard no more about the scheme, or whether Robert was successful in growing the plant at all.²⁴

Last Days

Robert died in 1909, soon after gangrene took hold in his remaining foot.²⁵ He left money to pay for his headstone, having written the words for it himself.²⁶ It is perhaps noteworthy that of all his pursuits in life, he chose to be remembered after his death as both a poet and a soldier.

*Rest, Warrior, rest, thy toil is o'er
Sleep the sleep that knows no breaking
Dream of battlefields no more
Days of danger, nights of waking.*

Liz Barnes
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²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ritson, p. 172

²⁵ Ibid., p.173

²⁶ Ritson, "The Rover"

References

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