
A walk through history

I thought this month I would share a favourite short local walk of mine, which takes in two of the area's most interesting historic buildings, both of which over the years have played a part in my own family story.

From the village take the Gisburn road as far as Green farm and then straight on to Lower Green. The road crosses a cattle grid and enters the old Peel Park. Follow the road to where it enters the Peel homestead, then follow the stony track to the left and on to the field gate, go through the gate to where two footpaths diverge. The path to the left goes up the hill between Peel Wood and Snear Hill. The path we want goes across the field in the direction of the railway line. This path affords fine views of the restored Peel Tower. Much has been written about the history of the Peel (too much to include

here) but a manor house has stood here since Saxon days, originally a wooden building but with stone towers added to it in later years and eventually clad or rebuilt in stone during the times of the Hamerton family in the 1400's - the Hamerton family would be linked with the Peel for over 600 years. Following the death of Chisnall Hamerton in 1908 the Peel was leased to Sir William Nicholson and in the years leading up to the start of the first world war Sir William had extensions added to the building and created gardens around it. It was to these landscaping works my grandfather, a domestic gardener by trade, came to work, travelling to Hellifield from his home in Brough, East Yorkshire just prior to the outbreak of the first world war.

During his time at the Peel my grandfather attended the Methodist chapel in Haw Grove on Sundays and it was here he met my grandmother Jane Parker; they were married in 1915. Their first son John, my father, started his working life in the gardens of the Peel during the 1930s.

Returning back to our walk, looking ahead a fence can be seen dividing the field, with a stile clearly visible in it. On crossing the stile, a bridge going under the railway line can be seen ahead; passing under the bridge, the path becomes a stony road which leads to the hamlet of Swinden and our next historical building, the impressive Swinden Hall.



The author's father, John Percy, in the Peel rock gardens during the 1930s



The Peel viewed from the footpath

Swinden Hall is a fine building consisting of three storeys and three bays featuring mullioned windows; over the front door is the date 1657, although an earlier building may have existed on the site, as some of the

buildings to the rear of the hall are said to date from an earlier time period. Who the hall was built for is unclear but by 1660 it was in the possession of the Talbot family, who were the lords of the manor of Bashall near Clitheroe. There



Swinden Hall

seems to be a connection between the Talbot family and the Hamerton's; according to a reference in the book "Whitaker's History of Craven", two portraits hung in the Hamerton's other property, Wigglesworth Hall at Wigglesworth, one showing John Talbot of Bashall and the other showing his wife Ursula Hamerton of Hellifield Peel and both portraits dated 1604. A Roman fort or camp is said to have been located between Swinden Hall and the railway line. A Roman road from Ribchester in Lancashire to Bainbridge in the Yorkshire dales may have passed this way, skirting Hellifield and Long Preston, where another camp is thought to have been located.

During the late 1960s or early 1970s my mother worked as a cleaner at Swinden Hall for the then residents, the Reverend Herbert Sparling and his wife. As we had no car, Mrs. Sparling would come to collect my mother. One Christmas time I was proudly showing off my latest collection of model soldiers to Mrs. Sparling and she suggested I should come with my mother to the Hall and show these to her husband as he was keen on military history. Thus began many interesting visits to the Hall during the school holidays over the next few years. The gardener at Swinden hall at that time was Hellifield resident Bill Grime. Bill started his gardening career alongside my father in the gardens of the Peel many years earlier. I can remember many hours sat with the Reverend by the roaring log fire in the drawing room of the hall while he explained many battles and campaigns from history using my model soldiers to re-enact the actions! Reverend Sparling never mentioned his own military service during the first world war, and it was to be many years after

his death that I learned he had served with distinction during that war.

Herbert Sparling was studying at Leeds university in 1914 and on the outbreak of war joined the university's officer training corps, he was commissioned into the regular army in 1915 and by 1916 was serving on the western front as a 2nd lieutenant in the Duke Of



Reverend Herbert Sparling, photo taken during his time at Dent in 1938

Wellington's West Riding Regiment. During his service he was decorated with the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry. Sadly he was badly wounded on the 18th of October 1917 resulting in the amputation of his left leg below the knee. By this time, he had attained the rank of captain but due to his

injuries he relinquished his commission and returned to his studies, gaining an MA in 1919 and then attending Wells Theological College, where he studied and was ordained as an Anglican minister in 1921. He held a variety of posts in parishes around the country, including the parishes of Dent and Cowgill in the Yorkshire Dales before his retirement.

Back to our walk, at this point I usually return the way I came, there is an alternative route by taking the small road from Swinden to its junction with

the Gisburn to Long Preston road and then along the verge in the Hellifield direction before crossing over and taking the path through Tommy Clarke wood and down to Halton West Bridge, but with the amount of fast moving traffic along this road today I would not recommend it as a safe alternative and I think retracing the route back to the Peel to be the safest and best option.

John Percy - February 2022