

Arncliffe

“Erncliffe, the ‘eagle rock’. Our first sight of this village was under an additional charm and variety, it being the gala day. After passing the wild range of moorland dividing the two vales, which appears like a wilderness of heather, we suddenly find spread before us a vale beautiful and romantic, through which sped the Skirfare river, sweeping in a delightful curve under the shade of fine timbered trees, whose branches, and the fleecy clouds, are mirrored in its waters.”

“Standing on its brink and sweetly sequestered amid a mass of foliage is the venerable tower of Arncliffe Church, behind which is the mansion and its park-like meadow. Here and there grey walls and rustic homesteads combine to form one of the most charming pictures of a rural village. Scarcely had our eyes feasted on this picture when strains of sweet music floated up the mountain side, and from under the shadow of spreading trees swept forth men and maidens in bright and airy motion on the smooth green turf. We cannot say, from our elevated position if the dance was strictly elegant, but the contrast of scenes – one moment, as it were nothing in sight but stern mountain scenery; next, without preconception, the scene we have described spreads before our gaze. A more romantic picture, I never saw; its beauty enhanced by the artistic yet careless grouping of figures which were seen whirling under the branches of trees; others strolling by the margin of the stream and through the old churchyard, added to which was the inspiring strains of sweet music wafted on the bosom of the breeze. It was enough to enrapture the soul of any ordinary mortal. Arncliffe, or the “eagle’s rock,” is derived from earn, Old English for eagle, and clif, hence Earncliffe, a monstre pie-shaped rock overlooking the vale, was formerly a resort of eagles.”

“The church is dedicated to St Oswald; style perpendicular, consisting of nave, chancel, porch, and an embattled tower. The list of rectors commences with Adam Decanns, 1180. The old Norman church, built in the 11th century, came to an end in the reign of the 7th Henry. Chiefly by the efforts of Archdeacon Boyd, the church was thoroughly restored and beautified in 1841. The only remaining relic of the old Norman church is to be seen in the Archdeacon’s garden and consists of the socket of a pillar and part of the capitol. In the churchyard is a tombstone to the memory of that venerable worthy, Thomas Lindley, who died aged 94. He was the incumbent of Halton Gill, and spent 70

years in this district. Many are the droll stories recounted of this good man, who for near 60 years travelled to and fro, winter and summer, over the mountains, to conduct services at Hubberholme.”

“Arncliffe is one of the most ancient villages in the upper dales, and although its history cannot be traced beyond Norman days, yet it had an existence long before the compiling of the Domesday Book.*”

“The houses are spread around a pretty green. On the western edge of the village is Gill Beck, which rises in Stang Gill, near Malham Tarn. In stormy weather the glen appears most desolate and gloomy. The hamlet of Dernbrook, mentioned by Wordsworth, is situated in this vale. Near its junction with the Skirfare is a large Cotton mill, whose machinery, I believe, has been silent for 16 years; near to are some quaint 16th century cottages. A mile west, and midway between Litton and Arncliffe, and on the southern range bounding the river Skirfare, is a large cave. Litton village, some two miles up the vale, does not possess the beauty and interest that is attached to Arncliffe, yet a century ago its tall and broad-chested fellows, we are told, were famous wrestlers, and it was on this village green that Tom Lee met more than his match in Kitty Mytton, the village blacksmith. Between Litton and Arncliffe the stream often disappears, leaving the river-bed dry. In Hone’s Table Book there is a curious tale of a witch or prophetess named Bertha, known as the “Wise woman of Littondale.” Her home, it is said, was situated on a lone gill just on the outskirts of Arncliffe. The tale, which has been repeatedly told by all the chroniclers of the vale, does not on its face seem to have a semblance of truth, and is not worth repetition. The description of the scene reminds us more of the dark ages rather than the early years of the 19th century.”

“Leaving Arncliffe on the eve of its festive day, we climb the opposite steep pass through a stretch of woodland which beautifully clothes the edge of the moorland. There are many large rocks, grotto shaped, down which leap fairy cascades. Rabbits by scores, and of many colours which are feeding just on the edge of the woodland, prick their ears at the sound of our footsteps, their large innocent eyes shining at us in the growing dusk, then away they scamper to hide in their burrows. Just before we pass over the brow of the moor, we turn to have a last look at the bright scene. Sweet strains of music come floating up the moorland, mingled with the sounds of merry laughter. Lads and lasses, men and maidens are seen whirling under the shade of trees, others sauntering by the margin of the stream. Here and there in the twilight, a

glimmer of light from the cottage windows beamed through the screen of trees. As we pass onward the sound of mirth and music becomes fainter, and gradually dies away, but the memory of that delightful village scene still lingers. Passing up the dale, on either side are lofty Alpine hills; perched on the brow of the southern range is a farm whose sole purpose, one might imagine, was to act as sentinel on the vale below. Two miles further bring us to Starbotton”

*On the western limits of the village is the supposed site of a Celtic camp and line of defence.

from *A Thousand Miles in Wharfedale* by Edmund Bogg published around 1890