

## **OUR VILLAGE - 14TH ARTICLE**

### **SOME OLD EARBY FAMILIES**

#### **JAMES BROWN THE VILLAGE POSTMAN**

A century ago, in 1828, there was born of poor parents at the neighbouring village of Barnoldswick a lad who was destined to become one of the most honoured residents in the annals of our village. His name was James Brown, and his parents had such a struggle with poverty that the lad was put to work when he was seven years old, and he had to journey over the hills to Earby sometimes, carrying bobbins to a warehouse at Green End, returning with weft for the handloom weavers. When he was twelve years of age he was bound as parish apprentice to Wm. Sephton, the Earby village tailor, and he remained with his master until he attained to manhood.

As a youth, James Brown was eager to attain knowledge and improve his position in the community, and he gladly availed himself of the facilities afforded by the Methodist Sunday School, where he acquired the fundamentals of reading and writing. He was an omnivorous reader, and he developed a keen relish for literature. He was made a teacher at the Sunday School when in his teens, and became superintendent as a young man, a post which he held for a greater part of his life, for sixty years almost continuously.

As soon as he was free from his apprenticeship he was married at Thornton Church to Martha Turner, on July 14th, 1840, and the union was happily prolonged for more than half a century. The wedding took place on Earby Feast Monday, and attended by friends, the bridal pair walked to and from the church, the double distance being over two miles. In the afternoon, which was the Sunday School "walking day," the happy couple occupied the place of honour at the head of the Methodist Sunday School procession.

Mr. Brown became more enterprising after his marriage, and opened a shop at the bottom of Aspen Lane, fronting Water Street, and he later built the imposing grocer shop with an adjoining residence, on the opposite side of the street, where he resided for the rest of his days.

In addition to groceries and patent medicine the ambitious tradesman specialised in books, stationery and newspapers, and "James Brown Corner" became the centre of public interest. Men and boys used to behold with wonder the pictures which were displayed in the "Police News" and other illustrated papers as they continued to make their appearance. The stone landing outside his shop was often used as a platform for open-air public meetings, especially by temperance propagandists and political agitators. Mr. Philip Snowden used "his platform" at the beginning of his career.

#### **VILLAGE POSTMAN**

It was the custom for letters to be brought from Skipton to Earby twice a week, but with the opening of the railway from Skipton to Colne there was an extension of postal facilities, and Mr. Brown's shop became the first village post office, and the worthy tradesman was installed as postmaster. There was only one delivery of letters, in the morning, and an evening dispatch of letters, for a long period, and Mr. Brown had no difficulty in discharging his duties to the satisfaction of the public, and he became one of the best known

men in the village and countryside. He was a genial conversationalist, rather curt and abrupt in speech at times, but withal taking a kindly interest in the lives of the people. For many years he served the Skipton newspapers as local correspondent, and he took great delight in his minute yet effusive style. His services were often sought as chairman for lectures, entertainments, and other public gatherings, and his wise and witty sayings made him a popular master of assemblies.

But it was at the Methodist School and Chapel that Mr. Brown was in his best element. The "Old Chapel" in Stoneybank Road was very dear to him, and when it was used as a Sunday School and night school after the New Chapel was erected, he took a very zealous interest in all its proceedings. Before the days of compulsory elementary education, the Sunday Schools afforded to many young people their only chance of acquiring knowledge and social intercourse of an elevating nature, and the two schools in our village were crowded to overflowing with eager young people. He was an amazing Sunday School superintendent. Small in stature, spare in form, yet he possessed commanding qualities of a unique character. He dominated the school by the force of his own personality. There was nothing perfunctory about him; he carried out his duties with fervid enthusiasm. No one who heard him will ever forget his reading of the hymns. On one occasion he called out in the tones of a drill sergeant, "stand up!" - and the whole school rose instantly; then to everyone's amazement he went on - "Stand up for Jesus! Ye soldiers of the Cross." He had a sharp eagle eye for spotting offenders, and he would administer an immediate reproof from the desk. He is especially remembered for the addresses he used to give to the full assembled school. The passing of some great man of eminent character afforded him an appropriate text, and he never failed to "improve the occasion" when any local incident of note took place. Old scholars of sixty years ago delight to recall how Mr. Brown made effective use of "John Ashworth's Strange Tales" for reading to the school after the lessons were concluded, and his fervid and dramatic reading of those sketches produced an abiding effect upon the minds of the listeners. The Christmas entertainment in the Sunday School gave him a fine opportunity for the exercise of his unique gifts, and that platform was veritably his throne. Seated in the centre of the large platform, supported by the officers of the school and friends who were to address the gathering, and surrounded by the chapel choir, with a sea of faces in front (for every inch of standing room was occupied), James Brown had regal sway. In his peculiarly impressive style he gave out the opening hymn :- "Hark! the herald angels sing," and then for three hours he scintillated wit and wisdom as the programme proceeded. There was commendation and praise, with encouragement for all.

### **A PLATFORM SHOCK**

On one memorable Christmas evening he got a shock, and so did all who were present. In the middle of the entertainment it was the invariable custom to sing "While Shepherds" to the "Old Glory" tune. Two verses had been sung with hilarious gusto and as they were repeating the last line of the third verse - "And this shall be a sign" - there was a creaking and a crash, and in an instant all the occupants of the platform were huddled together. The central beam of the platform had broken, and some of the planks gave way, but happily no one was hurt. But what a sensation, and what a coincidence! After a little while the rest of the programme was proceeded with, but under difficulties. The main item in the evening's entertainment had been an unrehearsed incident.

For sixty years James Brown was a local Methodist preacher. He came on to the Colne Circuit, which then included the area now served by the Nelson and Barnoldswick Circuits in

addition to Colne. He was also in much demand in adjoining circuits, and visited places in the Clitheroe, Skipton, Crosshills and Addingham Circuits. To the end of his life he was a welcome preacher at Albert Road, Clone, and Water Street, Skipton. He captivated the children at Clone with his inimitable addresses and they looked forward eagerly to his coming. They had an unforgettable experience one Sunday morning as the preacher was reading the story from the acts of the apostles of Peter's deliverance from prison. "Now then, children," he exclaimed. "what is an earthquake? There was a dead silence, so the preacher continued: "Well , if you won't tell me I'll tell you. An earthquake? Why, it's nature sneezing! (suiting the action to the word)" The effect produced upon the congregation was indescribable, and never could be forgotten by those present, for it was some minutes before the preacher was able to proceed with his reading, the whole assembly being convulsed with uncontrollable laughter.

An experience at Barley in Penile Forest well illustrates the sacrifices which the local preachers of sixty years ago had to endure. Mr Brown was "planned " to preach at Barley, at the foot of Penile on a fine summers day, when he was a young married man. The journey had to be made on foot, and as the first service was in the afternoon he had to get his dinner before he left home in the forenoon. His good wife, however, provided him with supplementary provision in the shape of an apple pasty, which was carried in a capacious coat pocket. When he drew near to Barley he halted by the side of the stream which runs by Roughly, to eat his pasty. The glare of sun made him uncomfortable, and looking around he espied a nice shady place across the stream where he could feast with contentment, so he rose with the pasty in his hand to cross the stream. Unhappily he stepped, on a slippery stone, lost his balance, and in the momentary agitation the pasty slipped from his hand and went floating down the stream. "I darted after the pasty," Mr. Brown gleefully related, "and grabbed as much of it as I could. Then I sat down under the tree, pulled my shoes and stockings off, and after wringing my stockings I hung them on the branches to dry. After that I finished eating my pasty, and I didn't want anything to sup!"

### **DARK DAYS**

In the dark days which followed the closing of the Victoria Mill, after the removal of the Bracewell family, Mr. Brown took a leading part in the formation of the Earby Shed Company, which built the Albion Shed to provide work for the villagers, and he was appointed chairman of the company. He was also appointed as chairman of the Earby Water Co., and he was one of the managers of the Wesleyan Day School until it was taken over by the County Council.

Mr. and Mrs. Brown celebrated their golden wedding on Earby Feast Monday, July 14th. 1899. After the parade through the streets of the Sunday School scholars, a presentation was made to them in the Wesleyan Chapel, which was crowded. In addition to personal gifts there was a handsome time-piece bearing a suitable inscription, and a purse of gold.

Mr. Brown's earthly pilgrimage came to an end on July 14th, 1908, and during Earby Feast Week he was laid in his last resting place in Earby Cemetery. His wife passed away a few years before. On the stone which stands at the head of the grave there is added a significant inscription - "And of five children who were interred in Thornton church-yard." These children all died in infancy. Mr. Brown had six other children, three of whom are resident in Earby now - his son John and two daughters, Mrs Kay and Mrs. Briden. Three sons entered the scholastic profession, James, William, Ebenezer and Albert, but the last-named took up

journalism and served his apprenticeship with Mr. John Dawson on the old "Pioneer" staff. For three years he was domiciled in Ceylon, and occupied with great credit the post of reporter to the Legislative Assembly. He has since held several editorial positions in connection with provincial newspapers. Mr. Brown's grandson, A.B. Kay, has had a brilliant journalistic career. Such a character as James Brown will always remain an incentive to Earby youths to live a worthy life, ever striving to be of service to the community in which they live.

"Not once or twice in our rough island story.  
The path of duty was the way to glory."

J.H.

(Continued)

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