

# Dale's most famous man became a ragged tramp

Richard Watson, the poet who was without doubt the most famous man in Teesdale for much of his life, died on 2nd October 1891.

There will be a function in a few weeks' time to mark the centenary of his death, with some of his still well-known verses being recited and sung. Stirring toasts to his memory will be mingled with fulsome praise for his talents. It is highly likely he will be hailed as one of the great men of dale history.

But sadly, he was thought of as anything but a hero in the latter stages of his life. For a time he was a ragged tramp, wandering hungry and poverty-stricken around the dale.

Richard was born at Middleton on 16th March 1833, the first son of William and Rebecca Watson. They lived in a house owned by the London Lead Company in Ten Row, which is now known as River Terrace. The couple already had three daughters.

William worked at Lodge Syke lead mine, where like other men of that era he toiled long hours in foul conditions underground for a pittance; and like most of the others he died at what now seems an early age, 47, after being ill for many lingering months.

To help support the family, Richard was allowed to leave school at the age of 10 instead of staying on to the usual age of 12. He began work in the lead mines as a washer boy at sixpence a day, and also ran errands for village shops at the weekend.

But many of his songs and rhymes are still sung and recited 100 years after his death

He was encouraged by the Rector of Middleton, the Rev John Henry Brown (known to one and all as John Henry) to write stories and poems, and not long after starting work he kept his colleagues amused by writing rhymes about them.

He married Nancy Brumwell of Ettersgill when he was 24 and she 20, on 24th September 1857. After the ceremony at Barnard Castle register office they moved in with his mother, who by that time was renting a house in Bridge Lane, Middleton.

They brought up a family, knowing spells of great happiness as well as tragedy, while Richard worked in various lead mines. But it was often said that he was never overfond of hard toil.

## First publication

Watson's first poem to be published appeared in the Mercury. It was about a conversation between the County Bridge and castle ruins. His first volume of poems, *The Poetical Works of Richard Watson*, was published in 1862. He hoped more books would follow quickly, but most of his work appeared only in the Mercury until a second book, *Poems and Songs of Teesdale*, was published in 1884.

His great love was scribbling verses and stories. He also enjoyed entertaining, mainly reciting specially-written poems about personalities and events at functions around the dale.

His first major performance was at a gathering in Middleton to mark the appointment of Octavius Wigram as governor of the London Lead Company, making him the top man in an organisation that had many operations around Britain.

## His father's death

Watson was always bitter about the way his own father died at the age of 47. He wrote about it in his poem *My Journey to Work, on passing Lodge Syke Mine*: *Large rubbish heaps along the hillside show, The vast extent of hollow ground below. Here toiled my father for his brains' support, Till poverty and toil his days cut short.*

His visit to the dale would be akin to the chairman of Glaxo Operations calling at the Barnard Castle factory today, but the arrangements on that day in the 1860s were quite staggering.

All publicans in Middleton were given the job of cooking a lunch for 1,300 employees. The meal was served on the parade ground of the Rifle Volunteers, and a squad of joiners built huge tables. Masons built special ovens to keep the food hot.

There were two sittings of over 600 men, with a final one for 100 overmen, clerks and foremen who had acted as waiters for the earlier sittings. There was music from

Mickleton Band and the Rifle Volunteers Band, before Richard Watson stepped up before the vast gathering to recite a long poem he had written to welcome the great man.

The fact that he was given star billing on such an occasion shows that he was held in high esteem even in his twenties, and his fame spread following the publication of many of his works in the Mercury as well as in a slim volume.

For years he was called to stately homes in the area to entertain on special evenings. He was invited to every important local event, such as the opening of bridges and houses, to utter appropriate rhymes.

When a famous person died, there was a Watson poem to pay tribute to his or her life. He and Nancy went off to Scotland for a spell, but when they returned he was soon back to his writing habits, and signing himself The Teesdale Poet.

But for all his fame he never

## Comic rhymes

While Watson wrote many serious verses about cruel conditions and poverty, he also composed comic poems and epigrams, such as this for a man who sold fish from a handcart in Middleton: *Here lies the body of poor old Whit. He's dead and gone to the brimstone pit. The devil his soul he did not wish, because he stinks so much of fish.*

earned enough money for his own family. Other miners spent nights knitting, embroidering, carving, cobbling and doing other odd jobs at mine lodging shops where they spent weekday nights, going home only at weekends.

## Rhyming adverts

Watson had fun writing a few advertising jingles, including one for ginger cordial made by Ralph Raine, a Middleton chemist. One verse ran: *If you want drink your hearts to cheer, to keep your craniums cool and clear, Forsake your whisky, rum and beer, of ills the source. Raine's Cordial, noted far and near, is best of course.*

They earned extra coppers in this way. They also mostly spent their weekends gardening to produce vegetables, or tending poultry or a pig to give their wives and children more food.

Richard was usually too busy writing, reading and dreaming to do anything like that, so Nancy and their five daughters were even more impoverished than most families in the dale.

Nancy had a sharp tongue, so there were plenty of battles as she tried to goad him into going to work, and staying hard at it like the rest of the men.

For his part he was full of good intentions. He kept promising to mend his ways, but usually, if it was a choice between finishing an interesting poem and getting to a mine to start a shift on time, the poetry would win.

The Teesdale lead mines were never lucrative in his lifetime, and as he got older a number of them closed. It became difficult for the best of the young workers to find jobs, and there was little hope at all for senior men – especially those who had a reputation for being lazy.

The old poet was out of work for a long spell before a tragedy that distressed him greatly – the death of his daughter Mary, who was his favourite in the family and the one most interested in his writing.

She died on 16th March 1890 at the age of 16 after a lengthy illness. The Mercury reported that week: "Her long and lingering illness had created a general sympathy which found kindly and pathetic expression at her funeral."

## Eyesight problem

Watson had only one good eye, having had the other damaged in an accident. At the age of 54 he went into partnership with two men called Scott, one of whom also had only one eye, while the other was totally blind. They tried to work a barytes mine near Snaigill – three men with only two good eyes between them. They gave up before long.

Mary was buried in the graveyard at Middleton Parish Church. Not long after that her father was given a temporary job at Holwick Mansion, which was being built as a shooting lodge for a London financier called Cosmo Bonsor, who was an MP and director of



This photograph of Richard Watson was taken when he was 51, and he certainly looked rather prosperous. But he often looked tattered. His trademark was an untidy hank of wool which he wore round his neck in place of a scarf. He reckoned it was just as warm and comfortable as a knitted scarf, and it helped to set him apart as an eccentric poet, gaining attention which he enjoyed.

the Bank of England.

It seemed like luck, but after some time Richard was busy there when a block of stone toppled and crushed his foot.

Though the injury seemed not too serious at first it developed into gangrene. Richard Watson died at the age of 58, 18 months after his beloved Mary, and was buried next to her.

## Unhealthy mines

It was rare for any Teesdale lead miner to live to retirement age. One reason was set out in an 1864 report for the Mining Commissioners, in which a doctor tested the air in 110 northern mines and found it harmful in 96. He said: "The air breathed by miners must be extremely unwholesome, and fully explains the prevalence of disease among the miners."

## Head man's gift fountain

Robert Bainbridge, chief superintendent for the London Lead Company in Teesdale, gave the public of Middleton the fountain which still stands in the village centre.

It resulted from a decision by workmen to present gifts to Bainbridge and his wife rather than wait until he retired. Miners from all over Teesdale, as well as Alston Moor and Weardale, chipped in to make a total of £262 15s5d.

Gifts bought with it were a gold watch and chain, a mantle clock, a dress ring and gold ring, a polyglot bible in an oak cabinet, a silver tea and coffee service with tray, and a silver inkstand. All this still left £65 in the kitty, so it was handed to Bainbridge in a purse.

He used it to buy two fountains – the Middleton one and a similar one which can still be seen in Nenthead.

There was a great ceremony as the gifts were handed over, with five bands marching up and down the Rifle Volunteers' parade ground. The bands were from Middleton, Mickleton, Eggleston, Garrigal and Nenthead.

Richard Watson was called on to write and recite a long poem in tribute to Robert



Bainbridge. It included the lines: *Poor were the mines and trade depressed, and things looked cheerless at the best, Yet, free from idle doubts and fears, he's struggled on nigh forty years, With courage and untiring zeal, still working for the public weal.*

## Appeal fund launched to help him but few people wished to donate

At the start of 1889 Richard Watson was at his lowest ebb, looking like a ragged tramp after a long spell out of work. He tried hard to find a job but failed.

Eventually he called at the Mercury office in Barnard Castle, where the editor and staff were shocked by his tattered appearance. They decided to launch an appeal fund to help him.

An article on 20th February under the heading Mr Richard Watson, the Teesdale Poet said: "Oh hope that sweetens sorrow's cup and on life's rough sea bears us up from sinking 'neath the tide."

"Thus sings Richard Watson in his *Poems and Songs of Teesdale*. But it is for others he sings of hope; for himself there is only the cry of despair. The gloom of sorrow hangs over his declining years."

"The cares of a dependent family, sickness in his home, with no work and none to get, well nigh overwhelm him. His poverty is more terrible than an admiring world suffered Burns to struggle with."

"Day by day, and through the long hours of the night, he has tramped the country through in fruitless search of work. He has carried with him a letter of commendation from a gentleman of great authority and local influence."

"It accords generous praise to the character, work and genius of the old poet. High as is the credential, it did him no good. For employers of labour prefer a young man to an old one, and in no case have a particular relish for a poet."

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Richard Watson's gravestone in Middleton churchyard, which also refers to his daughter Mary, who died before him, and his wife Ann, who lived on to the age of 80.

"But an old man, and even a poet, must live, and we commend the case to our readers and the numerous admirers of the *Poems and Songs of Teesdale*. We will gladly receive and duly acknowledge in these columns any subscriptions sent to us for the Richard Watson Fund."

A flood of cash may have been expected, but in the first week there were only two donations – £1 from the wealthy Timothy Hutchinson of Eggleston Hall and two shillings from a reader. The following week's total was £1 5s.

A correspondent wrote: "It is pitiful indeed to find a man at his time of life, and a poet too, who has sung many delightful songs for us, now on the verge of starvation."

It took several more weeks, and renewed pleas, to get the fund to the £5 mark. A man who

was annoyed about the scant response suggested it was due to Watson's poor work record and added: "He is charged with being shiftless and thriftless."

"But authors have ever been subject to such charges, which I much fear are characteristics of genius."

Thomas Newell, who ran a small theatre company in Barnard Castle, put on a benefit night for the poet and later put £5 into the fund.

Two other concerts were put on, both with meagre takings. At the second the chairman declared that some observers felt Watson had only to himself to blame for being poor. But he added: "Poverty is the badge of his kind. Poets ever have been, and perhaps ever will be, poor."

It was a time of great hardship for the people of Teesdale, so their reluctance to part with even coppers, especially for someone they felt had not helped himself, can be understood.

But there was a contrast when Charles Parsons, landlord of the Cleveland Arms Hotel in Middleton, was ordered to pay £83 damages for an accident involving his horse and trap, even though he had been nowhere near the scene himself.

Many thought that unfair, so a fund was started to help him. It raised £25 in two days and enough to pay most of the damages within two weeks.

After Watson's daughter Mary died in March 1890 there was renewed interest in his appeal fund. The Earl of Strathmore sent £5, then added another £5, and the Duchess of Cleveland sent £3.

He also landed his job on the building of Holwick Mansion, so he became reasonably well off in his last month. But the job was to cause his death.



Richard Watson was born in Ten Row, Middleton, now known as River Terrace. The houses and others in New Town were built by the London Lead Company for its workers. Before the estate was built employees had great difficulty finding houses as so many men travelled from all over Britain seeking work in the lead mines.

## GAINFORD IN TEESDALE

The intriguing book by Janet McCrickard

is available again in shops throughout the district

It has been written, calligraphed and illustrated by this talented author, making an interesting history and guide for residents and visitors

The third edition has been published by the Teesdale Mercury—£2-50

Shops wishing supplies should contact THE TEESDALE MERCURY, TEESDALE 37140