

Kildwick's 1839 visitor – maybe ?

— a story by Isobel Stirk

I left home early in May 1839, for Lothersdale and Stone Gappe House, on a pleasant morning with the mist still lingering at the bottom of Main Street and the leaves on the trees in the parsonage garden only just stirring in a gentle breeze.

A one horse gig was waiting for me in Church Street - arranged by Mr Sidgwick, my future employer - as I waved goodbye to Papa, my sister Emily and Keeper. Keeper, of uncertain pedigree, was Papa's replacement for his old terrier Grasper, and he seemed to grow fiercer by the day. However Keeper was Emily's constant companion and with her hand resting on him she had saved him from many a confrontation with the canine population of Haworth village. Emily suffered greatly when away from home and, with Anne working as a governess in Mirfield for nearly a month now and Tabby, our old friend and servant, staying with her sister Susannah, I was glad that she was at home to keep an eye on Papa and the house. I knew that the bread would be baked every day, for Emily enjoyed pummelling the dough whilst reading her German book which was propped up on the side.

I was glad that I did not have to travel by the Union coach which departed from the Devonshire Arms in Keighley. Last time I met my friend Ellen Nussey there a fight had broken out and we were glad to escape to the fields through which our walk up to Haworth took us. The gig bounded through Keighley as we took the turn pike road under Hawcliffe. The road followed the line of the River Aire and just before we entered a small village we had to stop at the toll bar. As the gig had only one horse the driver paid two shillings. He later told me that the toll for four horses was five shillings, two- three shillings and fourpence but there was no toll for the Royal Mail coach. I had travelled this road before, aged eight, when, with Emily and my two elder sisters Maria and Elizabeth, Papa had taken us to the Clergyman's School at Cowan Bridge. I did not remember much about that journey although I recall Papa telling us that we would pass through the town of Settle, many miles to the north-west, which the seventeenth century writer Daniel Defoe had described as: *The capital of an isolated kingdom surrounded by barren hills*. How sad the return journey was from Cowan Bridge - just Emily and myself and Papa. Maria and Elizabeth had returned home to die in the summer of 1825. Papa had taken Maria home by the Leeds public coach and she died a few days after arriving in Haworth. What a terrible journey for poor Papa with a child who was actually dying.

We passed through small settlements and villages. Papa had told me to look out for the old medieval church at Kildwick. He had heard that John Pering, the incumbent there, was building a school for the children of the village - having obtained a grant from the National Society. Papa often talked about the Reverend Pering and his ambitions for Kildwick, for it was his aim to do the same for the children of Haworth and the surrounding area. He was always writing letters to differing people about many things - always trying to better the lot of his parishioners.

Before we climbed the hill to Lothersdale I had caught a glimpse of the old church – a very long building, much longer than St Michael and All Angels at home, but it was set prettily on a rise overlooking the river and an old bridge.

What do I say about Stone Gappe? It is a magnificent three storied house, built in the eighteenth century, like my own home, but with many more rooms and spacious gardens. What do I say about my employers? Mrs Sidgwick I had heard of, for she was the sister of Anne Greenwood who was the second wife of Theodore Dury, the rector of Keighley parish church. He and his daughter Caroline sometimes came to take tea with us although his sister Isabella did not. A little bit of a mystery there - Tabby thought that Miss Dury had set her sights on Papa after Mother died but his six children put her off the idea! Sarah Sidgwick ignored me for most of the time and she spoilt and pampered her children - making it difficult for me to control them. She also made me work very hard with lots of sewing and, horror of horrors, I had to dress dolls. John Benson Sidgwick, the master and the owner of a mill in the market town of Skipton, was far kinder to me. I did enjoy walking in the grounds of Stone Gappe, my eyes always turned towards the moors on the horizon which would eventually meet up with those above Stanbury and Crow Hill. Sometimes Mr Sidgwick would join me and the children, his faithful Newfoundland dog at his side, and he spoke openly and was on the whole a frank and pleasant gentleman.

I had not been long at Stone Gappe when the whole family, and me also, went to be part of a house party at Swarcliffe House near Harrogate where Mrs Sidgwick's father John Greenwood lived.

I really hated it and, in my mind, was treated abominably. The other guests looked down their noses at me, the governess, and talked quite openly about their distaste for governesses and what they called the whole tribe of them - half of them detestable and the rest ridiculous. I sat in the window, trying to read after they had stared at me as I had curtsied to them when they entered the room. I vowed there and then that I would hand in my notice and this I have done and it will not be long before I am back in Haworth. I will miss the open spaces and the green fields around Lothersdale but no doubt Emily will soon have me walking over the moors to the library at Ponden or making a longer trek to see her friends, the Sunderlands, up at High Withens farm.

Whilst in Lothersdale I did have one very pleasant day out when I visited the small village of Kildwick which led to me learning of a coincidence.

On one or two occasions I had walked with the family to nearby Christ Church in the village - the walk back up the hill to the house was not for the faint of heart. Sometimes I was not invited - a snub by Mrs Sidgwick to me I felt. Mr Sidgwick had played a big part in getting the church in Lothersdale built and consecrated and it had only been open for worship a year in 1839 - before this Lothersdale had been part of the parishes of Carleton, a small settlement nearer to Skipton, and Kildwick. Mr Sidgwick's father had bought a pew in Kildwick church and the family were friendly with some people who lived in that area.

One morning I was summoned to the drawing room at Stone Gappe by Mrs Sidgwick and told that I would be accompanying her and her daughter Mathilda to Kildwick - her maid apparently had been taken ill during the night and was confined to bed. Our first stop was when the carriage pulled into the yard at the White Lion Inn. It was evidently a stopping place for the coaches as the 'Royal Union' to Leeds was just leaving as we arrived. Mrs Sidgwick had said that she wanted to take Mathilda into the church at Kildwick to see the altar there. She was busy working on a cloth for it - perhaps as a memorial to her father-in-law - and I had seen her surrounded by yards of rich red material and gold threads on many an afternoon. Recently I had occasion to look for Mathilda, who was missing once or twice from the schoolroom, and found her ensconced with her mother - needle in hand sewing.

Mrs Sidgwick and Mathilda were not long in the church but it gave me an opportunity to wander in the grounds - the graveyard not as crowded as ours in Haworth but crowded enough. I walked the length of the building and came across a little oak door above which was a sundial. The wording gave me a start as the name was a little familiar to me - '*Howarth Currer Arm/DonoDedit/1779*'.

And now, dear reader, I crave your indulgence to return to an earlier time. When Emily and I were making the long journey back to Haworth, with Papa, after the fever outbreak at Cowan Bridge and the deaths of our two elder sisters, he had asked us if we had ever heard or met Miss Currer who was apparently a patron of the school.

She was heiress to the Richardson family and was a book collector - it was rumoured that she had over fifteen thousand books. She lived at Eshton Hall, in the village of Gargrave, a few miles from Skipton and it was well known that she was charitable and generous. Papa was convinced that we, as a family, had benefitted from her benevolence and he related to us his thoughts. From his face we could tell that it was hard for him to return to this awful period in his life when Mama died. He told us that her long and painful illness had given him additional expenses and he got into debt and as her annuity had come to an end he was totally dependent on his small salary to support us all. With tears in his eyes he told us that, although he had not mentioned his difficulties to anybody, quite unexpectedly - and he thought in answer to prayer - he received several gifts of money from kind friends and he got a letter containing a bill for fifty pounds. He was convinced that this gift was from Frances Currer.

But now I go back to the present:-

I was not aware that I had gasped until a man's voice at my elbow asked, in the dialect of the district, if something ailed me. From the spade and the soil on his boots I assumed he was the sexton at the church and I told him that my father, the incumbent at Haworth, was familiar with the name Currer and reading the name there had given me a surprise. Smith Laycock, that was the sexton's name, told me that the Currers were an ancient local family and the side chapel and many windows in the church at Kildwick bore their name and coat of arms. He went on to say that a relative of the Currers, the Tennants, lived in a large Jacobean house up the steep incline behind the church. This house, Kildwick Hall, was built initially by Hugh Currer in 1650. I should have liked to ask more but he was more interested in the fact that I came from Haworth and he told me he was acquainted with John Brown, father's sexton. A shout startled us both and we turned to see a young boy of about seven or eight leaning out of a small window in a cottage which backed onto the churchyard. Mr Laycock waved to the lad and told me that he was a good fellow and that he was called Hartley Tillotson and he loved to help Mr Laycock with his work. Mrs Sidgwick and Mathilda were shaking hands with a man at the church door - I assumed it was the vicar - but apparently it was Mr Holdsworth the curate. Before I joined them the sexton said that I should remember him to John Brown and if, in a few years, he wanted an apprentice, he had to let him know as he thought that the young John Hartley Tillotson would be ideal.

My day out did not end there. We had a further call to make before we passed over the river bridge and returned to Lothersdale. My trip down memory lane and the Currer connection had not quite finished. We left the churchyard, crossing over a humped bridge over the canal which ran from Leeds and walked up a very steep and narrow paved path. Mrs Sidgwick said the curate had told her that this path, made by the vicar John Pering, was called by the locals 'Parson's Walk' as it led directly from the church to the vicarage. It was a pleasant walk, bordered on one side by hedges and fields - the blossom out now in full - and on the other side ran a stream. I could see a few ragged children paddling about happily and further up a woman was taking a bucket full of water up the banking. At the top of the path we saw a magnificent house, with high gates and stone lions resplendent on either side. This was Kildwick Hall, the ancestral home of the Currers. I was told to wait in the yard whilst the two of them paid their respects to Mrs Tennant, who was the half-sister of Frances Currer who may have been my father's mystery benefactor.

It was nice to sit for a while on a stone bench and muse on what I had found out - Papa would be so interested. The house was in a splendid position, looking down on the old church, the canal, the river meandering its way to the south and the hills towards Lothersdale - glowing in the late afternoon sun. I knew my Papa would love to hear all about my day in Kildwick and the Currer connection.

I could hear voices coming to the front door, my time of relaxation was nearly over - back at Stone Gappe there would be the children to sort out and, I am sure, Mrs Sidgwick would have enough cambric for me to hem to keep me going until I left! I turned the corner, intending to meet them at the start of the paved path which would lead us back to the waiting coach. I entered a courtyard, there was the noise of pots and pans coming from what I assumed was the kitchen. A door opened and a rosy cheeked girl, carrying a pail of slops, smiled shyly at me as she emptied her bucket into a stream just outside the back gate. I hoped it was not the same stream I had seen earlier - where the children were playing and from which the woman had filled her bucket. Papa was very keen to get a clean water supply to the village of Haworth - he was trying his best. He had the theory that lots of diseases, including the dreaded cholera and typhoid fever, were spread by contaminated water. I hoped that these diseases would never come to this pretty peaceful village because I had seen too often the sorrow and devastation they caused as whole families succumbed to these unwelcome visitors that came frequently to ours.

The solemn tolling of the church bell, heralding another funeral, could be heard all too regularly as John Brown worked quietly in our graveyard, digging yet another grave. Perhaps Kildwick was not like Haworth - I hoped not.