Three Hundred Years of the History of Farnhill Hall

A report on a talk given by John Stell

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A most interesting address on "Three Hundred Years of the History of Farnhill Hall" was given on Sunday afternoon on the lawn in front of the Hall by Mr. John Stell (Sutton) under the auspices of Farnhill Primitive Methodist School Young Men's Class. Mr. R. Mosley presided over a gathering of about 40 members and friends.

Mr. Stell said that whatever the pitfalls there might be for the student of place-names, they were on solid ground when they said that Farnhill was originally "Fernhill" – the hill of ferns. The ice age had left ice-scratched rocks on the moor, and pre-historic man in the dim centuries of long ago buried his dead on the crest of the hill, and hid flint arrow-heads were to be found where the peat had weathered away.

The surveyors of Domesday said that in Fernhill there was one manor held by Gamel, and that there were two carucates of land to be taxed. Immediately after the survey the Anglian owners were dispossessed of their lands, which were divided among the captains who had aided William the Conqueror. The Bolton Fee, of which Farnhill formed a part, was granted to Robert de Romille, a Norman of good family. His name still survived in Rombalds Moor.

There had probably been a dwelling where Farnhill Hall now stood from the earliest occupation by man of the valley, the place being especially suitable for defence.

The castle of Skipton was built, and then the lower chieftains began to build their manor- houses, of which Farnhill Hall was one. He was inclined to think that its earliest form would be much as it was seen today. The situation of the Hall was ideal, and commanded extensive and beautiful views in every direction.

Walls eight feet thick

The walls of the Hall varied from six to eight feet in thickness. There was a small room over the principal doorway, which was said to have been used by the inmates for pouring boiling lead upon the heads of enemies who had penetrated the outer defences and who were attempting to batter down the door. He was inclined to think that it had been used as a domestic oratory.

Farnhill Hall had, of course, its ghost, though the story, like the spirit of the blue lady who was said to visit occasionally the coffin-shaped room near the north-west tower, was not very substantial. So far as he could gather, the best time to see the ghost was during the night following a merry market day in Skipton, helped by a liberal amount of the kind of spirits kept in bottles.

The first mesne lord of Farnhill, under the Romilles of Skipton Castle were the Fernhills, and very appropriately he was named Adam. This Adam de Fernhill was one of the witnesses to the deed of translation of the Embsay priory to its new home at Bolton, dated 1151. Another charter, made soon after the canons had settled at Bolton was also signed by Adam de Fernhill, along with Renier, of Glusburn, Samson, of Cononley, and others. More than a century then elapsed before there was further mention of the Fernhill family.

A family quarrel

In 1326 there was a family quarrel amongst the Farnhills. Robert de Farnhill was the heir of John de Farnhill. To William, his brother, he granted the tenements etc., on condition that his mother, Agnes, had a life-interest.

When Agnes died, William claimed possession, but Robert appeared to have denied making the agreement with William. For some reason or other William did not pursue his claim, and Robert probably took possession of the property. It was the same then as now, often the dishonest man got the better of the bargain.

In 1423 the Farnhill family were mentioned in connection with Bolton Priory. In that year the prior summoned Robert Farnhill and other men for [word unreadable] the trees and underwood at Bolton and Sutton in Airedale to the value of £20. At the pre-war rate of money this would amount to about £600, so that the thieves must have been helping themselves pretty freely.

Going back to 1376, it would appear that the Church had got possession of Farnhill Hall. A document of that year gave the name of John de Coppeley of Oxenhope as the next tenant of the Hall, for he bought from Nicholas de Rymyngton, vicar of Kildwick Church, and Richard de Moselegh, Vicar of Carleton, the manor of Farnhill with certain small exceptions.

The document was of much local interest, for in it was found the name of a vicar of Kildwick that had not previously been recorded. Whitaker did not give it, nor was it mentioned in the History of Kildwick Church, or in the list posted in the Church, but there seemed no reason to doubt Nicholas de Rymyngton's right to have his name inserted, as his co-signatory from Carleton had his name in the list of vicars from that parish.

He had traced the Farnhill family for three centuries and endeavoured to show that the work of such men was the foundation of the national character.

The "tunnel"

In the discussion which followed the lecturer was asked if there was any truth in the story of a tunnel from Royd House to Farnhill Hall. Mr. Stell said he could find nothing whatever to prove the story. The story might have some small foundation, but he was sure that a tunnel under the sandy bed of the river would have very little foundation.

Mr. and Mrs. Reddiough were cordially thanked for allowing the party the use of their grounds, and Mr. Stell was also thanked for his lecture.