

# THE EARLY DAYS OF DOWFOLD HOUSE, CROOK.



This is the story of the inhabitants of the above dwelling, which was constructed in 1863 by Joseph Pease to house one of his employees in the Crook area. This person has always been identified as a manager, or an agent, for one of the Pease collieries in the region, of which there were several.

The house is situated at the highest end of a long street of dwellings, stretching from Helmington Row almost to the junction with Church Bank, a road that leads steeply downhill to Crook. Although originally named Dowfold, the row of houses is named Dovefold in the census records for 1881 and 1891, reverting in 1901 to Dowfold.

Dowfold House does not seem to have been graced with this title originally, as it is only listed as one of the dwellings in the row known as Dowfold until 1881, when the name given is South View. Throughout the life of the dwelling, it was surrounded by collieries, the nearest being the oddly named Hole In The Wall, near the top of Church Bank. This pit was not owned by Pease & Partners at any time and therefore was not likely to be connected with Dowfold House.

The most promising was Bowden Close Colliery, situated about a kilometre to the north-east of the house, and owned throughout its life by the Pease company. The entrance road to this pit is now marked by a mine tub filled with flowers, presumably placed there by the present owner of the property.

My recent examination of the English census records, and other documents, has uncovered something of the story behind the tenant of Dowfold House, as outlined below.

The house was occupied for many years, probably from when it was built, by a man named Robert Dixon, listed in most records as a colliery agent, but after examining the management records for most of the Pease pits, and having found no mention of this person, I was rather perplexed. However, I finally came across an entry in a trade directory of 1894<sup>1</sup>. This contains the following:

*Name: Robert Dixon.*

*Address: South View, Crook.*

*Occupation: Manager of the coke department for Joseph Pease & Partners.*

With the identity of the occupier, and his position, established I turned my attention to his past life, discovering that Robert was born in Staindrop, County Durham, in 1827.

He was the son of Ralph and Ann Dixon, and in his early life enjoyed the company of four siblings;

George, born 1812.

Sarah, born 1819.

Elizabeth, born 1823.

Ann, born 1831.

The census record for 1841 also listed another son, Joseph, born in 1833.

Ann Dixon, the wife of Ralph, was formerly Ann Booth, born in York in 1798.

The 1841 census records are usually brief, providing little information other than names, ages, and sometimes, places of birth, but luckily that for Staindrop is an exception, as it gives the occupations as well. Ralph Dixon is listed as Miller and Grocer; unfortunately the occupation entry for Robert, then aged 15, is unreadable.

Things are clearer in 1851 however, when Ralph is listed as Miller, Grocer, and Druggist; with his several offspring, Robert included, shown as Shop Assistants, presumably in Ralph's own establishment. Joseph is not listed with the family in this census.

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<sup>1</sup> *Whellan's Directory of County Durham. Francis Whellan, 1894.*

An entry in *Slater's Commercial Directory for County Durham*, dated 1855, lists Ralph Dixon as a Miller at Staindrop.

Before the next census, carried out in 1861, Robert has taken a bride, his marriage to Elizabeth Bowes being recorded late in 1853<sup>2</sup>.

In 1861, Robert is no longer at home, he is now living at Newsham Park, Winston, County Durham, with his wife's family.

By this time he is 34, and his occupation is given as a Coke Agent.

The Bowes household comprises:

John Bowes, Head	age 66.	Born Winston, Durham.	Occupation: Gardener.
Mary Bowes, Wife	age 57.	Born Layton, Yorkshire.	
Mary Bowes, Daughter	age 26.	Born Winston.	Occupation: Domestic servant.
Robert Dixon, Son in law	age 34.	Born Staindrop.	Occupation: Coke agent.
Elizabeth Dixon, Daughter	age 30.	Born Winston.	
Mary J. Taylor, Grand-daughter	age 8.	Born Hurworth, Durham.	Occupation: Scholar.
William Booth, Boarder	age 31	Born Layton, Yorkshire.	Occupation: Railway labourer.

John Bowes, Robert Dixon's Father in law, died in 1870.<sup>3</sup>

Robert and his wife Elizabeth do not appear to have produced any children, as the 1871 census for Helmington Row lists the occupants of South View, Dovefold as:

Robert Dixon	Head	Age 44
Elizabeth	Wife	Age 40
Sarah	Niece	Age 25
Mary J. Taylor	Niece	Age 18
Mary C. Booth	Niece	Age 8
Elizabeth Booth	Niece	Age 6
John Booth	Nephew	Age 4
Esme Teesdale	Servant	Age 25
Mary Hodgson	Sister in law	Age 36

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<sup>2</sup> Marriage registration for Robert Dixon & Elizabeth Bowes.

Date: 4<sup>th</sup> quarter 1853  
District: Teesdale  
County: Durham  
Volume: 10a  
Page: 223

<sup>3</sup> Death registration for John Bowes.

Name: John Bowes  
Birth: 1794  
Date of death: 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 1870  
Age at death: 76  
District: Teesdale  
County: Durham & Yorkshire North Riding  
Volume: 10a  
Page: 165

Unfortunately, Robert's wife, Elizabeth, died in 1876<sup>4</sup>, aged 46, apparently still childless, leaving Robert living with his sundry relations at South View, and presumably still in his management position at the Bankfoot coke works.

But sometime between 1876 and 1881, when the next census was taken, Robert re-married, this time to a lady born in Massachusetts, America. Only her Christian names, rendered as Sarah Nichol P. are given in the 1881 census records, but she and Robert are listed as married, so there can be no doubt about that fact. Other information is not forthcoming about the couple, save for the sad fact that Robert was soon to be deprived of his wife yet again, as Sarah Nichol P. Dixon is registered as having died in 1886<sup>5</sup>.

By 1891 Robert is still living in South View, with his niece, Elizabeth P. Booth, and one servant, Mary A. Linekey, age 25, from Tow Law.

How much longer Robert remained at Dowfold House, is unclear, but by 1901, he had certainly left, as the house was then occupied by a retired miner named George Bailey, aged 58, and his wife Ruth Mary, aged 55. It is possible that this person was, at age 58, an ailing miner from one of the Pease collieries who was living in the house as a caretaker, as 58 was rather too early for an active miner to retire!

It is also clear that Robert Dixon has by this time retired, as he can be found living '*on own means*' at High Green, Great Ayton, Yorkshire, aged 74, with his niece, Elizabeth P. Booth, who is still single and aged 36. Elizabeth is listed as '*companion*' to Robert, and also living with them is William Gartrell, aged 7, a nephew from Kirby, Yorkshire. The family have one servant, Kate Hopper, aged 19, born in Great Ayton.

Robert did not enjoy his retirement for long, as his death was registered in April 1903 as below:

Name: Robert Dixon  
Birth: Abt 1825  
Age at Death: 78  
Date of death: 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 1903  
District: Stokesley  
County: Yorkshire, North Riding  
Volume: 9d  
Page: 404

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<sup>4</sup> Death registration for Elizabeth Dixon:

Name: Elizabeth Dixon  
Birth: Abt 1830  
Date of death: 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 1876  
Age at death: 46  
District: Darlington  
County: Durham & Yorkshire North Riding  
Volume: 10a  
Page: 4

<sup>5</sup> Death registration for Sarah Nichol P. Dixon

Name: Sarah Nichol P. Dixon  
Birth: Abt 1824  
Date of Death: 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 1886  
Age at death: 62  
District: Auckland  
County: Durham & Yorkshire North Riding  
Volume: 10a  
Page: 115

There is no doubt that Robert Dixon was an important member of the Pease organisation, as the Bankfoot works was the centre of a large group of collieries and related plants owned by Pease & Partners in the district.

This is best illustrated by quoting Francis Whellan, who wrote in 1894:

*“Coal is very extensively worked in this township, (Crook and Billy Row), principally by Messrs Pease & Partners, who have, in addition to five pits, a large number of coke ovens and a large firebrick works situated at Bank Foot. Here is produced the well-known “Pease’s West” coke. Amongst the ovens are a number of the Simon-Carves type, the gases from which produce large quantities of sulphate of ammonia, benzol oil, and coal tar, as by-products.*

*The collieries presently worked are Roddymoor, sunk in 1844, where five seams are met; the “Main Coal” seam being 3 feet 9 inches thick and 34 fathoms deep’ the “B” seam, 3 feet 4 inches thick at 25 fathoms deep; “Five Quarter”, 3 feet 6 inches thick at 16½ fathoms deep; the “Ballarat” seam, 1 foot 10 inches thick at 12½ fathoms deep, and the “Yard” seam, 3 feet thick at a depth of 11 fathoms. These thicknesses and depths are a fair average of those seams met with in the Stanley Pit, the Sunnyside Pit, and White Lea.*

*At Sunnyside and Stanley the “Harvey” seam is also found; at each place it is 2 feet thick.*

*Stanley Pit was opened in 1850. White Lea in 1855, by Messrs Bolckow, Vaughan & Co and acquired by Messrs Pease & Partners in 1889. Sunnyside was opened in 1867.*

*At these collieries, and at their very extensive brick works, coke ovens, and shops situated at Bank Foot, a large number of men are employed, giving a total of over 2,000 men alone over 16 years of age.”*

It is interesting to consider the thickness and depth of the seams worked in the area, and to remember that all the work of coal recovery was carried out by hand.

The Pease Bank Foot coke works was the first in Britain to install by-product ovens, in 1882<sup>6</sup>.

As mentioned by Whellan, these were Simon-Carves ovens that allowed the recovery of a range of chemical products which had previously gone to waste. Bee-hive ovens had traditionally been used, similar in design and operation to ancient charcoal producing ovens, and there was a considerable opposition to the new by-product recovery types from the steel producers. However the move to by-product ovens brought many advantages, not only the ability to recover for sale a range of chemical items, such as gas and coal tar; some of the gas was reused to heat the coke ovens themselves, and thus a direct saving on fuel was possible.

The amount of pollution from the ovens was also greatly reduced, a fact no doubt much appreciated by the local population around the coke oven sites.

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<sup>6</sup> *An Outline History of By-product Coking Plants in Britain. Dr D.G. Edwards, 2001.*



Memories of an industrial past: route of an old colliery railway line, behind Dowfold, Crook.



Memories of an industrial past: a Helmington Row pub.



Memories of an industrial past; a pit tub at the entrance to the former Bowden Close site.



Memories of an industrial past; the former Mines Rescue headquarters at the old Bank Foot site.

## NOTES ON VARIOUS MEMBERS OF THE DIXON HOUSEHOLD.

As shown above, Robert Dixon had several members of his extended family in residence with him at Dowfold House. One of these was Elizabeth P. Booth, who remained with him throughout his life there, and afterwards when he retired to Great Ayton, still a spinster.

Elizabeth was Robert's niece, the second child of his first wife Elizabeth's sister, Mary Bowes, who married William Booth, a farm labourer from Leyton, Yorkshire. This person, in 1861, was boarding with the Bowes family.

Mary Bowes marriage to William Booth was registered in 1862:

Name: Mary Bowes  
Date: 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 1862  
District: Teesdale  
County: Durham & Yorkshire North Riding  
Volume: 10a  
Page: 205

This entry matches that for William Booth.

The couple produced three children:

Mary E. Booth, born 1863  
Elizabeth, born 1864  
John, born 1867<sup>7</sup>

As will be seen above, the three children first appear in the Dixon household in 1871. This obviously follows the untimely death of their father, William Booth in 1867:

Name: William Booth  
Birth: Abt 1830  
Death registration: 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 1867  
Age at Death: 37  
District: Teesdale  
County: Durham & Yorkshire North Riding  
Volume: 10a  
Page: 134

There is no record of the cause of death given in the register, although this would be recorded on a copy of the death certificate.

Following the death of their father the three children remained at Dowfold for a few years, the first one to move on seems to have been John. Unfortunately he does not appear in the 1881 census, although further details of his life indicate that he may have been living at Esh at that time.

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Birth registration for John Booth:

Name: John Booth  
Date: 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 1866  
District: Teesdale  
County: Durham & Yorkshire North Riding  
Volume: 10a  
Page: 231



Certainly John Booth appears in the 1891 census records for Esh; these show that he was boarding with the family of Thomas Hall, in Durham Road, Esh. By this time John is aged 24 and he is a mason by trade. At this time he is still single, but in 1896, he married Sarah Dodds Moore, a local girl, who, interestingly enough, was born in Crook.<sup>8</sup>

Sarah was born in 1869,<sup>9</sup> the daughter of James and Jane Moore, of Crook, Durham, who in 1881 were living at 5 West Terrace, Esh Colliery. James was a coke drawer, who came from Ireland, and his wife Jane was born in Scotland.

Sarah was the third of three children, her elder sister having been born in Scotland in 1860. The next child, son William B, was born at Crook in 1866, indicating that the family had moved from Scotland by that date.

By 1901, John and Sarah are living at 44 Durham Road, Esh, apparently without offspring. John's occupation is now listed as: *mason at coke ovens*. There are no records of any additions to the family, and the next record that can be found unfortunately details the death of John Booth in 1913.<sup>10</sup>

The final mention of Sarah comes in the form of a marriage registration in 1921, when a Sarah D. Booth is recorded as wedding John Stevenson, at Lanchester, Durham. By this time Sarah would have been 52, and there is no definite proof that the person married in 1921 is indeed Sarah Dodds Booth, widowed by the passing of her husband in 1913, although it is quite possible that she did remarry.

The next member of the trio to leave Dowfold House was Mary Ellen, who was still in residence there in 1881, although by that time her future must have been determined, as in July 1882, she was married to Alexander Davidson Mackay, a Surgeon and General Practitioner, from Caithness. How and when she met her husband is not clear, but the couple obviously remained in Durham until at about 1888, as their first three children were born at Newsham.

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<sup>8</sup> Marriage registration for John Booth & Sarah Dodds Moore.

Date: 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 1896  
District: Lanchester  
County: Durham  
Volume: 10a  
Page: 332

<sup>9</sup> Birth registration for Sarah Dodds Moore.

Date: 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 1869  
District: Auckland  
County: Durham  
Volume: 10a  
Page: 234

<sup>10</sup> Death registration for John Booth.

Name: John Booth  
Birth: Abt 1867  
Death: 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 1913  
Age at death: 46  
District: Lanchester  
County: Durham  
Volume: 10a  
Page: 428

It must be assumed that Alexander Mackay was practicing in the area, although by the time of the 1891 census, he and his growing family can be found living in 27 St Georges Street, Chorley, Lancashire, with Alexander conducting his practice from his home address.

The 1891 census records the Mackay family as:

Alexander Davidson Mackay.	Head	age 33	born Caithness, Scotland.
Mary Ellen Mackay.	Wife	age 28	born Newsham, Durham.
Flora Mackay.	Daughter	age 7	born Newsham, Durham.
Jessie Mackay.	Daughter	age 5	born Newsham, Durham.
James M. Mackay.	Son	age 3	born Newsham, Durham.
Louisa Farbridge	Governess	age 25	born Newsham, Durham.
Bella Slater.	Servant	age 20	born Quebec, Durham.
Mary Gilfred.	Servant	age 17	born Waterhouses, Durham.

By 1901 the family had grown, although Flora was no longer living at home.

Alexander Davidson Mackay.	Head	age 43	born Caithness, Scotland.
Mary Ellen Mackay.	Wife	age 38	born Newsham, Durham.
Jessie A.L. Mackay.	Daughter	age 15	born Newsham, Durham.
James M. Mackay.	Son	age 13	born Newsham, Durham.
Mary J. Mackay.	Daughter	age 6	born Chorley, Lancashire.
William A.D. Mackay.	Son	age 3	born Chorley, Lancashire.
Kate E. Thompson.	Governess	age 29	born Preston, Lancashire.
Helen Slattery.	Servant	age 17	born Widnes, Lancashire.

Unfortunately the strange Booth family fate of early death struck again in 1902, when Mary Ellen's husband, Alexander Davidson Mackay passed away in January of that year<sup>11</sup>.

The final member of the Dixon household, Elizabeth Booth, remained with Robert until 1901, but from that date she disappears.

There is no positive notification of her life – or death, after she moved to Great Ayton, although oddly enough, there is one death recorded for an Elizabeth Booth in 1911; at Chorley, in Lancashire, so it is just possible that this person was Robert Dixon's faithful companion Elizabeth who was visiting her widowed sister Mary Ellen, at the time.....

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<sup>11</sup>

Death registration for Dr Alexander Davidson Mackay:

Name:	Alexander Davidson Mackay
Birth year:	Abt 1858
Age at Death:	44
Date of registration:	Jan 1902
District:	Chorley
County:	Lancashire
Volume:	8e
Page:	366

Turning to Robert Dixon's second wife, I was finally able to identify her as Sarah Nichols Pope, a Quaker school-teacher born about 1822 at Salem, Massachusetts.

Just when she came to England is not clear, but it is most likely that she arrived and met Robert Dixon through his connections with the Pease family, or with other Quakers in Darlington.

Sarah's marriage to Robert took place sometime around 1880, and lasted until her death in 1886.

Further investigation has produced a copy of her last Will and Testament, made in 1886, presumably just before her death, which was registered in the first quarter of that year.

This is an interesting document, which begins:

*"I, Sarah Nichols Pope Dixon, the wife of Robert Dixon, of South View, Crook, near Darlington in the County of Durham, Colliery Manager..."*

The will goes on to bequeath to her sister, Elizabeth Hacker Valentine<sup>12</sup>, of Lynn, near, Salem Massachusetts, in the United States of America:

*"all my share of the household goods, linen, silver, china, and other articles and effects left to me by my dear parents and now in her possession, and I also bequeath to her all my pictures, books, and other things belonging to me..."*

Sarah notes that her husband, Robert Dixon is at that time:

*"in the enjoyment of a salary which I know is, in his view to be sufficient to provide for his comfort and the indulgence of all that his tastes require..."* Notwithstanding his current situation, Sarah, aware of the possibility that his circumstances might change, bequeaths Robert the sum of \$300.00 per annum for the rest of his life.

The remainder of Sarah's assets are to be placed in a trust fund, to be administered by the Provident Life & Trust Company, of Philadelphia, in the United States of America. This fund is to be used to set up an establishment to be known as the "Sarah N. Pope Teacher's Home".

In her will, Sarah notes specifically that the Home shall carry her maiden name, and she lays down very detailed instructions covering the purpose of the establishment, its layout, furnishings, and equipment. The Home is to be run by the Committee of the New England Yearly Meeting, who are also tasked with determining who shall be accommodated at the Home.

Her instructions on the latter are also explicit: *"They should be Members of the Society of Friends of the age of about forty-five years or upwards, who have devoted most of their lives to teaching, and have not married, and who are known for their peaceable, orderly, and devoted Christian lives."*

Sarah must have been a very determined woman, and one who was well travelled, as she makes the particular observation that: *"I should like a small room at the Home to be appropriated, if practicable to the reception of articles, such as books, pictures, photographs, and other mementos of travel which I have preserved as of interest in connection with my life work and journeys."*

The will is dated the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 1886, and is signed by Sarah at Crook, (no doubt in her home at South View), in the presence of :

Thomas Douglas, Mining Engineer, West Lodge, Crook, County Durham.

Elizabeth Douglas, West Lodge, Crook, County Durham.

Eunice C. Dixon, Great Ayton, Yorkshire.

Sarah's will shows clearly that Robert's second wife was a woman of strong moral character, and a devoted member of the Society of Friends. Mentioned in her are two people whom she regards as her friends, and suitable to be included on the committee to administer her bequest.

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<sup>12</sup>

Elizabeth Hacker, spinster, born 1814 at Salem, married Benjamin E. Valentine, widower aged 42 years, clerk in bank, on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1844

One of these is Augustine Jones, who was Principal of the Friend's School in Providence, Rhode Island from 1880 to 1902. The other is Gertrude Whittier Cartland, wife of Joseph Cartland who was Principal of the Moses Brown School in Providence from 1855 to 1860. Gertrude W. Cartland was a cousin of the famous America poet John Greenleaf Whittier, a Quaker and an ardent member of the anti-slavery movement in America.

In the event, Sarah's wishes were not carried out until 1903, when a lady named Sarah Alice Huntingdon turned over her residence at Amesbury, Massachusetts, to the Society of Friends. This was converted into a "*boarding home*," the money required for renovations and conversion coming from the trust set up by Sarah Nichols Pope Dixon in her will.

The completed home comprised 13 rooms, to cater for the unmarried, retired teachers of good standing as requested by Sarah Nichol Pope Dixon, but, due to the gift by Sarah Alice Huntington, her other specific request was not complied with. The home was named the Huntington-Dixon Home, and remained in operation until 1957, when it was declared unfit for further use, as it was unable to meet revised building codes. A new establishment was eventually completed, again based upon a donated home, and opened in 1962 at Hingham, Massachusetts.

Having established the identity of Robert Dixon's second wife, we must now step back a generation and discover more about his father Ralph Dixon, whom we last met in Staindrop in 1851, where he was listed as a grocer and druggist.

This might seem to be a nice, suitable occupation for a local chap, but it seems that, Ralph had been anything but a steady, reliable lad in his earlier days.

His father was a miller, who fell upon hard times during Ralph's early life, and at age 12, the boy was apprenticed to the local shoe-maker. Just what transpired during this period of his life is not recorded, even though Ralph is said to have kept a diary. What is certain is that on completion of his apprenticeship, he quickly left Staindrop and travelled to Leeds, presumably to find work at a suitable distance from his home village.

Work in Leeds was hard to come by in those days, and in 1793, Ralph, from either desperation or a sense of adventure, joined the army by enlisting in the 31<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Foot. Why the 31<sup>st</sup> was recruiting in Leeds at that time is not clear, but before long the regiment was sent to Ireland, and while there, Ralph met and married the daughter of another soldier, a girl named Ann Booth. At this time Britain was fighting the Peninsular War, and the 31<sup>st</sup> Regiment<sup>13</sup> were soon sent to Spain, Ralph taking his new wife with him, as was the custom at that time.

He was with his regiment at the Battle of Talavera, which took place on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1809, and during this action he was severely wounded in the right hand and shoulder.

Ralph was lucky that day; his regiment lost 250 officers and men killed!

Thanks to the efficient organisation of the British Army at that time, under Sir Arthur Wellesley, (later the Duke of Wellington) Ralph was able to recover from his wounds in a hospital in Lisbon before being shipped back to England, where he entered the Chelsea Hospital. On discharge from that establishment he returned to Staindrop, his life now enriched by his wife Ann, an infant son, George, and a pension of 1 shilling per day!

At first Ralph tried to take up his old trade of shoemaker, but he was hampered by his old wounds, and could not manage the work, eventually opening his grocery and druggist shop, of which he apparently made quite a success. With his family growing, and his business on a good footing, (it now included a drapery), Ralph began to consider the spiritual side of his life. His diary records that his brother was a Methodist, but Ralph did not like what he described as the ostentation of that

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<sup>13</sup> 31<sup>st</sup> Regiment (Huntingdonshire) of Foot. Raised in 1702 as Villier's Marine.

religion; he wanted something simpler, and he became attracted to the Society of Friends, commonly known as the Quakers.

This was quite easy to do and he was soon accepted into that denomination, although it seems he was still troubled by two things. The first was that, as a Quaker, he could only wear certain clothes, and he was worried by the fact that as a draper, he was encouraging others to wear garments not in accordance with his beliefs! This matter was soon resolved by Ralph relinquishing the drapery side of his business, and setting up instead a small steam-operated corn mill in Staindrop.

The second problem was less easily resolved, as it concerned his shilling a day pension. As a practicing Quaker, Ralph was supposed to be a pacifist, and his acceptance of an army pension did not sit too well with some of his Quaker brethren in Staindrop!

By this stage, we must assume that, with business thriving, the shilling a day was not quite so necessary as it once had been, and Ralph is said to have written directly to the Duke of Wellington in 1830, to state his case and request that the pension be stopped. It says something for the army organisation of the day, and for the high regard Wellington had for the 31<sup>st</sup> Foot, that Ralph actually received a reply. This stated that, in accordance with his religious principles, the pension would be stopped, but it would be held over, so that if in the future he felt the need for it, it would be re-instated!

Having firmly established his Quaker credentials, Ralph became a model member of the Society, and he came to the notice of other Friends, including Joseph Pease, who also kept a diary. In this he noted on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 1850 that he went to Staindrop and dined at Ralph Dixon's:

*"It was interesting to be with W.M. and R.D., two Friends who, from being soldiers with carnal weapons laid these down, and became clad with the armour of Christ and with weapons not carnal but mighty to the pulling down of the strongholds of Satan."*

This friendship with Joseph Pease stood Ralph in good stead when it came to his two sons, George, born in 1812, and Robert, born in 1824. It is highly likely that Robert caught the eye of Pease as a prospective employee, and we know that he was rewarded with many years of service from Robert.

The elder son George had aspirations to be a teacher, but in early life he was stricken by an attack of typhoid fever. His parents found him an apprenticeship on a nearby farm, in the belief that the outdoor life would assist his health. This proved to be the case, and within a few years George was able to continue his studies in his spare time as well as working as an agricultural labourer.

At this point, John Pease, (Joseph's son), found him a position at John Dean's school in Bishop Auckland, where in a few months he was able to conduct classes under supervision.

George Dixon was able to lodge with John Dean in his house in Bishop Auckland, where, as a widower, John lived with his two small daughters. The children were often visited by their aunt, Alice Swinburn, and she and George Dixon became firm friends, so much so that they were married on the 11<sup>th</sup> February 1834.

By this time John Dean had moved to New Shildon, giving up his post as headmaster of the school to work with Timothy Hackworth on the latter's steam engines, and George Dixon was appointed to succeed him at the school in Bishop Auckland.

George and his wife Alice remained at the school for about six years before they moved to Great Ayton, in Yorkshire, in 1841, accompanied by their family that by this time had increased by four, two boys and two girls, one of whom Catherine, died as an infant.

During his six years of teaching in Bishop Auckland, George had met other influential Quakers, two of whom, Jonothon and Hannah Chapman Backhouse, were examining a proposal to set up a school of agriculture in the North of England. Similar schools were already in operation in Lancashire and in Ireland, under the auspices of the Society of Friends, and the Backhouse couple were looking for a

suitably qualified person to oversee the new school. Because of his farming background, and his proven teaching ability, they considered him to be an ideal candidate for the post, and it was arranged for him to visit Lancashire and Ireland, to view the two schools already in operation. On returning from his tour, George was able to report personally on the farm schools at the Quaker Conference held in October 1840, and the proposal for a similar school was accepted by the delegates. Work began to find a suitable site, initially somewhere in County Durham, but then one of the Friends, Thomas Richardson, offered a donation of £5,000 towards the project, on condition that he was allowed to select the location. Richardson's offer was provisionally accepted and he promptly suggested a 74-acre estate at Great Ayton, in North Yorkshire as his preferred site.

The estate contained a fine Georgian house facing onto the High Green at Ayton, a splendid position, and ideal for the new school. The Richardson offer was accepted with alacrity by all concerned, not least by George Dixon, who lost no time in applying for the position of superintendent. His application was considered carefully, his teaching experience being taken into account, but it seems that the factor that weighed most heavily in his favour was that, in his youth, he had started a Temperance Group in Staindrop. This had been very successful, and since one of the criteria for the position at the new school was that the staff be total abstainers, George's application was duly accepted.

George and Alice lost no time in tidying up their affairs in Bishop Auckland and taking their family off to their new home in Yorkshire. Great Ayton is not very far from Bishop Auckland, and is interesting to speculate if the family travelled most of the way by train; that would have been quite possible, since the Stockton to Darlington Railway was, by 1841, operating successfully. However they travelled, they were very impressed with what they found; the house had five bedrooms on the first floor, servants quarters on the second, and spacious living and dining rooms at ground level. Oddly enough, it had two wine cellars, a fact remarked upon by George Dixon in his descriptions of the house afterwards. Since George and his family were total abstainers, and most of his visitors, being Quakers, would be likewise, it is rather difficult to image what use they could find for two wine cellars!

George and Alice were equally impressed with the surroundings, not only with the school grounds, but with the village of Great Ayton as well, and they quickly settled into their new roles. Both of them were given a carefully prepared description of their duties; George, as Superintendent, was required:

*"To teach the boys in and out of doors, and to give literary instruction to the girls. To keep all the accounts, regulate the bill of fare, and the quantity and quality of food, as fixed by the committee, and to have a general oversight of the whole institution."*

Alice Dixon was given the role of Female Superintendent, and she had even more detailed instructions:

*"To take charge of making and repairing all the girl's clothes and boy's linen, knit and darn stockings, make and mark the linen, teach the girls in the school from half-past one till half-past four. Take charge of the girls generally, and especially during religious reading and at meetings, and, without feeling the entire responsibility of the housekeeper's duties, to see and inspect the house daily, and should occasion require, confer with the superintendent or women's committee and give such directions as they may commend."*

Alice also had to tend her own 'flock' of five children when not carrying out her school duties, and she must have been fully occupied, especially in view of the fact that the pupils were doing farm work as well as their educational curriculum.

In the first year of operation, 1841, the school had 16 boys and 16 girls enrolled, and by 1845 the total number had increased to 61. That suggests a considerable amount of making and repairing – not to mention teaching!

In view of her workload, it is not surprising that Alice Dixon's health began to fail, resulting her death on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1865, aged 60, leaving her husband George still running the school, which was now generally known simply as The Friend's School.

But within a few months of his wife's death George retired; his place as Superintendent was taken by his son Ralph Dixon, and George left Great Ayton, travelling to America, where he must have visited the Quaker settlements in Massachusetts.

While in America, George remarried, this time choosing a lady named Eunice Congdon. The new Mrs Dixon was born on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1821 in Leicester, Worcester County, Massachusetts, and she was therefore somewhat younger than George Dixon.

The couple were married on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1866 at New Garden, North Carolina, and they stayed in America until 1883, when they returned to Great Ayton. During some of their time together in America, George and Eunice lived in a special apartment in The Butler School, Hampton, Virginia, of which Eunice was in charge. Documents relating to this school mention that through the efforts of George Dixon in England, forty-five students of the Institute were secured<sup>14</sup>.

The Butler School was named after Benjamin Franklin Butler (1818-1893), a politician and a general in the Union Army. He commanded Fortress Monroe, near Hampton in 1861 during the Civil War, and while there he issued an unprecedented order to the effect that slaves who crossed into Union lines would be declared contraband, and not returned to their owners in the south. This meant that they would be freed, and a special camp was built to receive them as free men and women.

The building which housed the school during George and Eunice Dixon's time there was believed to one of those erected to house the escaping slaves. The town of Hampton had been sacked by the Confederate Army, and the buildings for the camp, and later the school, were erected from material salvaged from the ruins. The school that was later to carry the name of General Butler was established to educate the freed slaves, many of whom were negroes, and by all accounts it was highly successful, going from strength to strength after its inception in 1870 as the Hampton Normal and Agricultural School. Today, the site is occupied by the Hampton University, and several of the original buildings remain in use, now heritage listed.

One of the early benefactors of the school was William Jackson Palmer, General in the Union Army, cavalry commander, and a man dedicated to abolishing slavery. Palmer was also a Quaker, but one whose conviction to the anti-slavery movement overcame his pacifism during the Civil War, and it is possible that George Dixon was inspired by Palmer's example to go to America and help with the new school. After all, he was well-versed in running both farms and schools through his life and work in England. When he arrived in America, George bought a large farm near the Hampton Institute, and it is reported that he regularly employed students from the Institute on his farm and also taught courses there on agriculture. It would seem that his early life as an agricultural labourer in Durham was not wasted, and it is probable his association with Eunice began as a result of his work at the Institute<sup>15</sup>.

When the couple came back to England, George at least was coming home, returning to the small Yorkshire town where his son Ralph was still in charge of the Friend's School, and where two of his other five children also resided.

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<sup>14</sup> "The Butler School". *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, University of Illinois Press.

<sup>15</sup> "Hampton Catalog". *The Booker T. Washington Papers*. University of Illinois Press.

For Eunice, now far removed from *her* home, life must have seemed strange in the close-knit community of Great Ayton, but she would have drawn comfort from the fact that her brother-in-law, Robert Dixon, living not far away in Crook, also had an American wife.

Whether the two ladies had had any acquaintance before Eunice arrived cannot be determined, but it is certainly possible, especially as Eunice must also have been a Quaker to have married George. The fact that both ladies were born in Massachusetts might also have some significance, as well as the fact that they were both teachers of some standing in America, and it is interesting to speculate upon this aspect of the Dixon family.

What is certain is that the two Dixon brothers were in contact throughout George's superintendence of The Friend's School, and after he returned from America accompanied by Eunice. Indeed George and his wife were present during the last days of Sarah Nichols Dixon's life, as the third witness to her will, (quoted previously), is Eunice C. Dixon.

We also know that after Sarah's death, Robert left South View, Crook, and returned to Great Ayton, accompanied by his companion of many years, Elizabeth P. Booth. At that time, 1901, George Dixon was still living in Great Ayton with Eunice, and at least two of George's children also lived in the small town.

George himself, Robert's brother, died in Great Ayton on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1904, and it is unclear how long Eunice stayed on there with her Dixon relatives for support. But we do know that at some point during the next few years she returned home to America, as her death is recorded on the 27<sup>th</sup> February 1907, in Hampton, Virginia, the location of The Butler School.

Robert, as we know, remained in Great Ayton until his death, having returned to join his family and reside close to brother George on High Green.

It remains only to mention one other person involved with Robert and Sarah Dixon, this being Thomas Douglas, the second witness to the last Will and Testament Sarah Nichols Dixon.

Thomas was a mining engineer who acted as Agent at Pease's West colliery from 1855 until 1891. During this time he resided at West Lodge, Billy Row, (now a nursing home), and he would have had a close working relationship with Robert Dixon.

The third witness to Sarah's Will was Thomas Douglas' wife, Elizabeth.

*John Gibson, June 2009.*

*All photographs by the Author, September 2008.*