

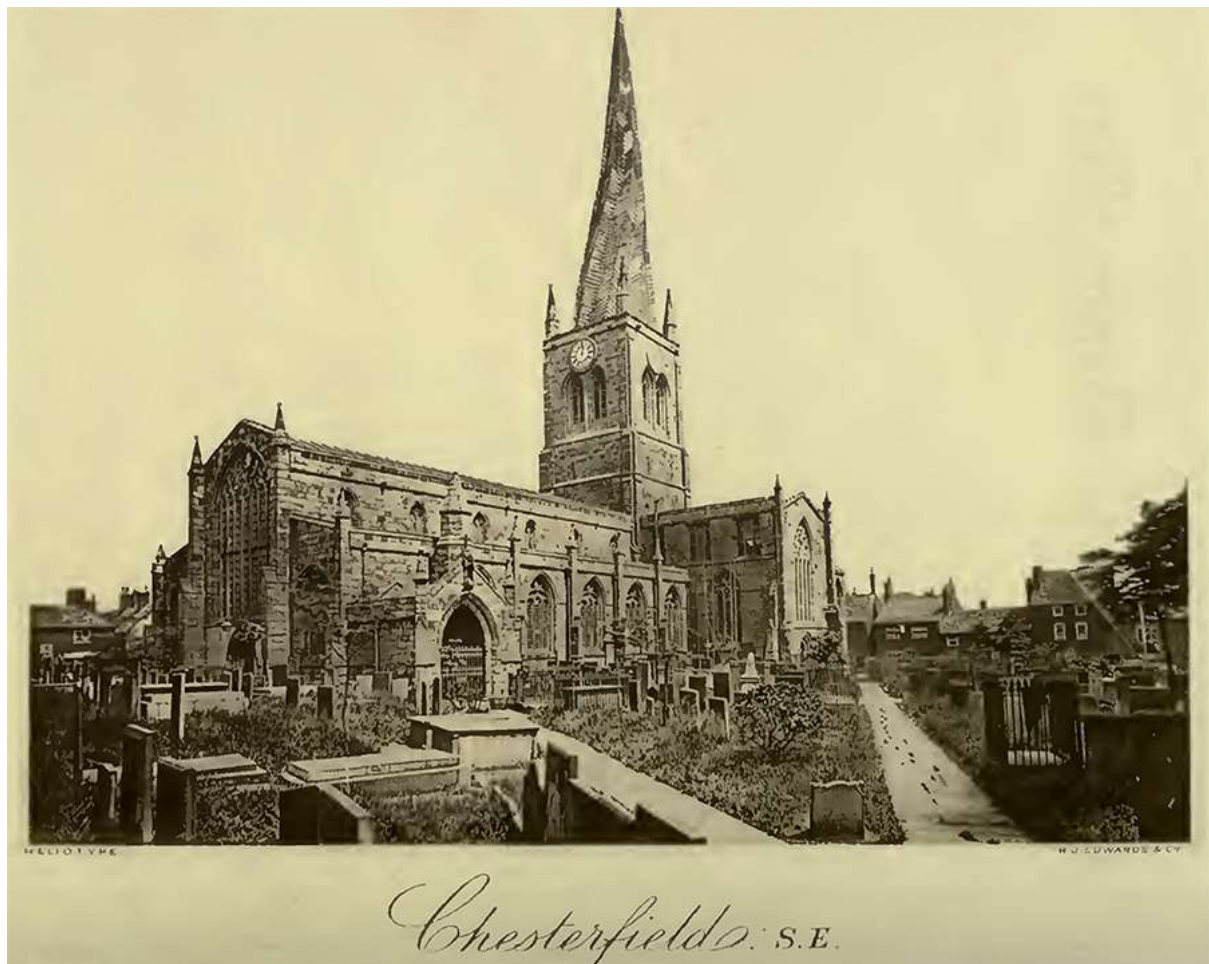


## CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY HISTORY BITES

*Chesterfield and District Local History Society's 'History Bites' are an occasional series of website published articles about Chesterfield and district's history.*

### Extract from *A History of Derbyshire* by John Pendleton 1886 – Chesterfield

J Pendleton, *A history of Derbyshire* (1886), London: Elliot Stock, pp. 232-246



*The Crooked Spire in 1875, some nine years before Pendleton's account of the town was published in his 'A history of Derbyshire'. Pendleton had published his 'Old and new Chesterfield' in 1882 (under a pseudonym 'Tatler') and would co-author another look at the town with William Jacques; 'Modern Chesterfield: its history, legends and progress.'*

## **CHAPTER XXI. Chesterfield in the Past—Some obsolete Customs—About the Streets—The Memorial to George Stephenson—The Grammar School and its Noted Scholars—The Old Church —A Crusader's Prowess—The Crooked Steeple and its Traditions.**

CHESTERFIELD—twelve miles south of Sheffield and twenty-four miles north of Derby—is an ancient borough. Camden, writing as far back as 1610, said it 'was of good antiquity.' It is also exceedingly rich in history; and there have been some strange sights in its fine market-place and worn streets since the first invasion of this country.

The Romans, whose main road to the north skirted its borders, were familiar with Chesterfield, which even at that time was an important mart for lead and wool; and in odd places about the town have been found several rare coins of the empire—one bearing Constantine's inscription with a representation of Victory; another the head of Trajan, with the figure of Hope on the reverse side; and a third of the reign of Caesar Maximian, inscribed with the words 'Genio, populi, Romani – To the genius of the Roman people.' There is little doubt that the adventurous warriors governed by the Caesars had an encampment at Tapton Hill, on the north-east of the town ; but to the Saxons belongs the credit of building the castle that once occupied the slope, and gave Chesterfield its name—'the hamlet in the field of the fortress.'

Of Danish occupation there is also some proof, for to this day a tract of land on the southern border of the borough is known as 'the Dane's Field,' and the large mound that still forms its most striking feature is supposed to be the burial-place of the invaders who fell in battle.

The manor, shortly after the Conquest, was owned by William Peveril, who seemed anxious, judging from his numerous possessions, to get the whole county within his grasp. It did not remain long in his family, however, for Peveril's son, having aided the Countess of Chester to poison her husband, had to forfeit his estates and fly from the land in which his selfish iniquity had wrought his ruin.

Then Chesterfield became the property of the Crown, and was held almost uninterruptedly by England's sovereigns until 1204, when it was given by King John to his 'great and opulent favourite' William Briwere. At the same time the town received its charter, the monarch also granting to the thriving place an eight days' fair on the festival of the exaltation of the Holy Cross, as well as a market which continues to be the most important weekly event in the borough's existence.

The town's progress was somewhat checked in 1266 by a fierce battle, in which Prince Henry, of Ferrers – a nobleman, who, after his defeat, hid himself among the bags of wool in the church cloisters, and was betrayed, like Samson, by a woman.

Notwithstanding the destruction of some of its buildings by fire, and the slaughter of its more valiant citizens, Chesterfield speedily recovered from war's relentless havoc, for in 1294 it boasted a guild of merchants, and was noted for its commerce and industry. In 1594 (eight years after the plague had brought death and sorrow to many a Chesterfield home) Ralph Clarke was made the first mayor of the town, and the Corporation consisted of six alder- men, six brethren, twelve capital burgesses, a town clerk, a master butcher, a master brazier, and other officials. The tendency of the time was towards feasting; and that the body corporate,

in the earlier part of its career, did not hold aloof from the pleasant custom is evident from the fact that it owned 'a silver cup, a silver-gilt bowl, a plain silver bowl and a little new wine bowl'—vessels that tell in their titles of sumptuous banquets, and of bumpers drunk to his worship.

Although the members of this ancient council looked after their stomachs, they also looked after the town; and the curious bye-laws, dating as far back as 1630, show how rigid was their local government. 'No manner of person, or persons,' said these bye-laws, 'being a foreigner or victualler, shall set up any stand or standing upon any markett-day, to forestall any shop or shops within the aforesaid towne of Chesterfield, in paine to forfeit for every such offence to the Corporation the sume of 3s. 4d. That no inhabitant within this towne shall suffer any person or persons dwelling forth of the towne, to sell any manner of graine upon any markett-day, in any house or chamber within the said towne, to the hindrance of the markett, before such time as proclamation be made for such purpose, or in the markett before the markett bell be rung, in paine to forfeit to the Corporation for every such offence, 2s. No inn-holder or ale-house keeper within this town shall keep or lodge any stranger above the space of one day and one night together without notice thereof first given to the mayor, in paine to forfeit for every time so offending, to the Corporation, 40s.' And even in the last century when Chesterfield, like Ashbourne, indulged in bull-baiting, prompted more by love of a cruel sport than by a desire to get their meat tender and wholesome, a bye-law existed by which every butcher killing a bull in the shambles was compelled to bait the animal previously in the market-place, or pay a fine of 3s. 4d.

Cromwell's soldiers, under Sir Thomas Fairfax, marched into the town in 1643, and their sanctimonious influence must have been very lasting, for twenty-eight years afterwards the Corporation, retaining only the loving-cup, bartered their punch bowls and other drinking vessels for a silver-gilt mace, which has ever since been the chief emblem of the borough's dignity. Chesterfield, unlike the county town, cannot make a brave show of robed functionaries in processions municipal; but this mace, massive, rich and beautiful, exquisitely worked with national devices, demi-figures and foliage, and surmounted by an elaborately decorated, open-arched crown, attracts a crowd whenever it sees daylight. In company with the mayor's chain and badge, and recently presented robes, it goes to church once a year at the head of the Corporation; and there is no prouder man in England on that memorable Sabbath than the Chesterfield town-crier, clad in new livery, with the gorgeous mace, fifty-four inches long, gracefully resting on his shoulder.

Chesterfield, although it was one of the first towns in the provinces to adopt the electric light (which it has now abandoned), is an old-fashioned place. In spite of increasing population, new industries, and many improvements, it retains an old-fashioned look, and reminds one of the coaching-days, and of the many-caped watchmen who were in the habit of stumbling fearfully through its dark thoroughfares, hesitating at the shadows cast by their own lanterns as they cried the hour, or shouted with grim satisfaction that it was a wet, dreary morn. New streets have taken the place of many of the orchards and gardens forming such a pretty border to the borough half a century ago; the ducking-stool, that formerly reared its ungainly head a perpetual menace to scolding wives, has been removed from the silk mill dam; the ladies' bridle, with its framework of iron and sharp cutting knife to silence prating women, was taken from the old poorhouse some decades back; and the bull-ring—a source of torture

to so many animals as they rushed furiously at the tantalizing dogs amid the laughter of the thoughtless—no longer disgraces the square.

But most of the streets keep much of their old character. They are for the most part edged with dusky brick buildings, roofed in some cases with heavy stone tiles; while here and there are little-windowed, yellow-washed habitations, some of which are thatched and moss-grown, and have walls slightly bowed outward as if they were bending under the weight of years. Around the fine market-place, thronged with brisk traders and robust country people on market-day, are many venerable business places, in which shop-keepers, more particularly in the early part of this century, lived frugally and made fortunes. The majority of the buildings, it is true, have thrown a somewhat modern mantle over their ancient shoulders, and, like some vain old ladies, ape a remarkable juvenility; but, despite plate-glass windows and other adornments, they cannot deceive the keen observer, who sees at once that they are really old friends with new attractive faces that unmistakably indicate a steady growth in Chesterfield's trade. Side by side with these rejuvenated shops are homely inns, hoisting old-fashioned signs, and keeping to old-fashioned ways; and on the north, east, and south of the market-place are still larger buildings not ashamed of their age—buildings with curious gables, and massive piazzas under which French prisoners lounged, when the big-raftered house that reaches on its thick stone pillars over the east end of Low Pavement bore the name of 'The Falcon,' and gave a warm welcome to travellers by stage-coach.

The most curious part of the town (with the exception of the crooked steeple) is the Shambles, a cluster of quaint-looking buildings, intersected with narrow passages, at the east end of the market-place. In 'Old and New Chesterfield,' we have described this 'extraordinary jumble of peculiar property,' saying: 'It is a museum of dark-roomed taverns with swinging signs; and of curious butchers' shops, with gigantic meat-boards, and thick sloping shutters, and heavy awnings that almost shut out the daylight from the pavement they overshadow as they try to shake hands with each other. It is a collection of many-storied houses, of antique cottages which have been thrust ignominiously into whimsical corners; of stone steps that lead into the oddest places; and of interesting oak carvings that carry the mind back to the time when the Knight Templars marched along its darkened ways, in their white habits, adorned with the red cross.'

The ancient town is not overcrowded with fine public buildings. Its market-hall is hybrid in architecture, and has a somewhat gloomy, desolate look, as if dissatisfied with its own shape and character. The municipal hall, which serves the dual purpose of council chamber and police court, is properly hidden in a corner, for its discreet modesty is about its only becoming feature. Who would imagine that this square, grim, flat-roofed building of dingy stone, innocent of exterior decoration, was an edifice sacred to the eloquence of the local senate, and to the cause of justice?

The only structure with any pretension to grace and elegance is the Memorial Hall, standing near the parish church, at the northern end of St. Mary's Gate. It was built in 1879, as a tribute to George Stephenson, the founder of the railway system, who passed the last years of his life at Chesterfield, and died in 1848 at Tapton House, the red-brick mansion peeping above the trees on the slope to the north-east across the valley, and easily discernible from the hall erected in his honour. The memorial building, which cost about £14,000, is Gothic in style, and whilst pleasing in an architectural sense, is also attractive because of the usefulness of its

object, for it is not merely an ornamental memento of the great engineer's worth, but a commodious home for nearly all the educational institutions in the town.

Perhaps no building in Chesterfield has more interesting associations than the Grammar School. It was founded in Elizabeth's reign, and endowed in 1594 by Godfrey Foljambe, who left the annual sum of £13 6s. 8d. towards the support of a schoolmaster. Among its benefactors also were James Lingard, of Brazenose College, Oxford, who, in 1612, left a sum of money 'towards the maintenance of a free school for the better education of poor men's children;' and Cornelius Clarke, of Norton, who, in 1690, gave for ever the rents and profits of certain houses and lands to the purposes of education, one of his stipulations being that £15 yearly should be paid to the chief master of the Grammar School 'for his better maintenance and encouragement in teaching, instructing, and educating of the children there in piety, virtue, and good literature.' The School, which was rebuilt in 1710, and again in 1846, has been the intellectual nursery of many eminent men. Here was educated Dr. Darwin, the eccentric but accomplished poet-botanist, whose work, descriptive of 'The Loves of the Plants,' obtained great popularity, although it was ridiculed in a clever burlesque styled 'The Loves of the Triangles.' The pupils included Dr. Pegge, the noted antiquary, whose wanderings amid the mansions, and castles, and antiquities of Derbyshire localities afforded him material for much learned writing, some of which is preserved in the pages of the *Archcuologia*. A diligent searcher into the past was this celebrated native of Chesterfield, and he is still remembered for his 'History of Beauchief Abbey,' his 'Dissertation on the Arbelows,' and various treatises on ancient coins, in one of which he says: 'From the reign of Queen Elizabeth to that of Charles II. the tradesmen and victuallers in general—that is, all that pleased—coined small money or tokens for the benefit and convenience of trade. And for this there was a perfect necessity, since at that time there were but few brass half-pennies coined by authority, and no great quantity of farthings.' Another boy educated at this School was Samuel Halifax, a Chesterfield apothecary's son, at one time Professor of Arabic at Cambridge University, and afterwards Bishop of St. Asaph; but the most distinguished scholar whose name is linked with the old schoolhouse was Thomas Seeker, the Nottinghamshire lad who rose to be Archbishop of Canterbury, yet never forgot the old town in which a part of his boyhood was spent; for writing from London, he says: 'All the variety and novelty of this great city would not equal the pleasure of an entertainment with an honest, learned, good-natured friend or two at such a place as Chesterfield.' Strangers sometimes turn aside to see George Stephenson's grave in Trinity Church; but the edifice, apart from its interest as the resting-place of 'the father of railway-travelling,' is comparatively unattractive.

The parish church—the church of the crooked steeple—is really the pride and glory of the town. It was built about the year 1350 on the site of an earlier fabric, and its crumbling stones, patched with new masonry, its worn porches, and belfry steps, uneven with the tread of generations of feet, tell a silent but eloquent story of the church's age. Even if it were not surmounted by the grotesque steeple, rising erratically 230 feet above the high, square tower, the edifice would still deserve to rank among the noted ecclesiastical buildings of the country. It is almost cathedral-like in its proportions, and only iconoclasts fail to admire its long nave, Gothic arches, pretty columns, and spacious chancel, in which, beneath marble slab and alabaster effigy, knights and ladies rest. The monuments in this part of the church are chief!)' in memory of the Foljambes, an ancient family which flourished at Walton in the sixteenth century, and indeed long before that period. Sir James Foljambe, who was High Sheriff of the county in the reign of Philip and Mary, was perhaps the most illustrious of his race, for his

epitaph says he was 'a man highly adorned by piety, by the integrity of his manners, by the heraldic bearings of his ancestors, and by his own virtues.' And one of his descendants, Godfrey Foljambe, anxious, no doubt, to preserve the family's character for piety and uprightness, left a yearly sum of forty pounds for ever 'to a lecturer to preach and declare the Word of God openly in the Church of Chesterfield four times at least every month of the year, upon the Sabbath or some other festival.' Nor would he have acted unwisely if he had left a small sum of money to preserve the memorials of his ancestors, for some of the tombs have their sculptured figures broken, and their alabaster effigies mutilated, and bear no indication of whose bones they shelter; in fact, they have become nameless graves.

In the chancel, which is bordered by richly carved wood-screens, hang the old-fashioned brass chandeliers, of Renaissance design, given to the church in 1760 by Godfrey Heathcote, one of the prominent inhabitants of the town; but the most extraordinary relic in the edifice is a gigantic bone, said to be one of the ribs of the Dun Cow slain by Guy, the Earl of Warwick. This warrior's prowess has afforded theme for many a ballad. Shakespeare also refers to his might, and in Henry VIII. makes the porter's man say, 'I am not Samson, nor Sir Guy, nor Colbrand, to mow them down before me.' Colbrand, mentioned in the old romance, 'The Squyr of Lowe Degree,' was a Danish Giant, who spread terror throughout England in Ethelstan's reign. Sir Guy, returning from the Holy Land in a pilgrim's guise, determined to check the braggart's vanity, and killed the giant, after a valiant fight, at Winchester. With his sword weighing many pounds, the Earl of Warwick then went in quest of the terrible cow that had gone mad under some malignant witch's influence, and was wildly ranging Dunmoor Heath. Sir Guy had killed a green dragon and a ferocious boar, and had gone through numerous perils in Palestine; but he was almost appalled by the Dun Cow, which, according to an old black-letter book of the sixteenth century, 'was a perfect monster, being six yards in length and four yards in height, with large, sharp horns and fiery eyes.' Nevertheless, the brave knight had not much difficulty in screwing his courage up to the sticking-point, and he wielded his sword with such skill and impetuosity that the mighty animal soon lay lifeless on the moor that had been shunned by all on account of the beast's fury. The cow's bones were distributed throughout the land as proofs of Sir Guy's achievement, and the famous rib on one of the Foljambe tombs in Chesterfield Church has done much towards extending the Earl of Warwick's fame. Local faith in this legend is strong; and although the bone bears less resemblance to a cow's rib than to a whale's jaw-bone, it would be idle to attempt to persuade some Chesterfield people that the curious relic is not part of the Dun Cow's remains.

The church is built in the form of a cross, and above the fluted pillars and fine arch, intersecting the two arms of the structure, rises the tower, bearing the crooked spire. The steeple, with its flecked ridges and fantastic twist and decided inclination towards the south, has been likened to a corkscrew, to the leaning Tower of Pisa, and to the uplifted tail of the Dragon of Wantley. It has for years been an object of curiosity, and people never weary of asking how it got askew. Tradition has done its utmost to denote the cause of the steeple's strange shape. It is said that the spire wrenched itself in bowing to a lovely, virtuous woman as she entered the church to be married; that Satan, having been shod by a blacksmith at Barlow, was in such agony on his way home, that he kicked out violently on passing the church, and twisted the spire with his hoof: and there is another version to the effect that Lucifer, resting one day on the pinnacle of the steeple, had his nose tickled by the incense, and sneezed so inordinately that he shook the fabric into the grotesque form that has made it famous throughout the world.

On the other hand, it is contended that the steeple was always crooked, and this idea has been put into rhyme:

'Whichever way you turn your eye,  
It always seems to be awry;  
Pray can you tell the reason why?  
The only reason known of weight  
Is that the thing was never straight;  
Nor know the people where to go  
To find the man to make it so;  
Since none can furnish such a plan,  
Except a perfect upright man:  
So that the spire, 'tis very plain,  
For ages crooked must remain;  
And while it stands must ever be  
An emblem of deformity.'

These traditions, although they do not touch the real cause of the steeple's grotesque form, serve one good purpose. They show what great fertility of imagination is possessed by Derbyshire people, and do something towards removing the aspersion:

'Derbyshire born, and Derbyshire bred,  
Strong in the arm, but weak in the head.'\*

The explanation of the spire's crookedness is simple. It was caused by neither an act of gallantry nor a Satanic kick. The steeple is constructed of wooden rafters, covered with lead; and it has, like some of the giants of the forest, been warped and twisted by the sun's heat and the tempest's power.

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\* In the *Reliquary* for October, 1864, Mr. Walter Kirkland showed the falsity of this proverb, emphatically maintaining— in the Derbyshire dialect—that the rest of England has by no means a monopoly of brains:

'I' Darbyshire who're born and bred,  
Are strong i' th' arm, bu' weak i' head;  
So the lying proverb says.  
Strength i' th' arm, who doubts shall feel;  
StrengthO' th' head, its power can seal  
The lips that scoff always.

'The rich vein'd mine, the mountain hoar,  
We sink, an' blast, an' pierce, an' bore  
By the might o' Darby brawn;

An' Darby brain con think an' plon  
As well as that o' ony mon,  
An' clearly as the morn.

' Strong i' th' arm, an' strong i' th' head,  
The fou, fause proverb should ha' said,  
If th' truth she meant to tell;  
Bu' th' union, so wise an' rare,  
O' brawn an' brain, she didna care  
To see or speak of well.

'The jealous jade, nor Darby born,  
Where praise wor due, pour'd forth bu' scorn,  
An' lying words let fau.  
Bu' far above the proverb stands  
The truth, that God's Almighty hands  
Ha' welded strength an' mind i' one;  
An' pour'd it down in plenty on  
Born Darbyshire men au.'

Transcribed by: unknown.

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