



We again change the scene of our explorations for the north side of the winding Wansbeck to the south side of that famous stream, and again after an interval of some months find ourselves within the historic confines Bedlingtonshire where we have no choice villages, all the villages save Netherton in that notable shire having been previously visited. Netherton for its age as a colliery village is almost entitled to rank as one of the conscript fathers of the Northumberland coal trade and we cannot remember the time when the coal of Netherton did not occupy a respectable position in the market, sending its black diamonds abroad to different parts of the kingdom, but, no matter where, always to a ready market.

In the year 1818 sinking operations first commenced at Netherton, and though it is on record that a year later coals were shipped from it at Blyth, it seems highly probable that the coal spoken of was not shipped at Blyth itself, but at a part of the river near the Ironworks at Bedlington, to which point keels used to come, taking in their cargoes from the carts which brought them down from Netherton.

This seems the more probable, as the old Netherton waggonway was not laid down at so early a period as 1819, but first had coals run down it in 1832 to what were termed the Netherton Gears on the north bank of the Blyth, and at a distance of two miles from the town itself, there to be first discharged into keels and floated down to the mouth of the river.

Netherton was originally only a small landsale colliery, and the first coals were won from small old fashioned pits, barely large enough to supply the immediate neighbourhood. But by and bye, as the field of operations became more extensive the waggonway down to the banks of the Blyth, and a still older one to the town of Morpeth, for the benefit of the inhabitants that ancient burgh, were laid down. These original mines were known as the Ironstone Pit (a quantity of ironstone was obtained from it and smelted at the Bedlington furnaces), and the Bob and Jean, the sites which may yet be seen marked out by the outlines of the old deserted heaps, black relics of the olden time.

Deserted now, however, is the old Ironstone, and stopped is the breath of the amiable Bob and the loving Joan, who have long given place to the Howard Pit, and to the more modern Frances Pit. Long also has the old waggonway ceased to be of service in this line of business, the place where it has been is only traceable in some few parts of its ancient course, and the part which yet remains near the colliery, with its weed grown track arid old fashioned rails, serves only to show the contrast between what is and what once has been.

Of the Morpeth Branch, the tradition to all that remains, though we believe that a portion of both the Morpeth and the Blyth way were utilised by the Blyth and Tyne Railway Company. The place where once stood the staiths of Netherton on the banks of the Blyth are yet indicated by the numerous wooden piles which stud the spot, causing it to look like the site of one of those aquatic villages of which geologists tell us, and it is by no means impossible that these same piles may serve some Sir Charles Lyell of the far distant future as a basis whereon to build up some beautiful, fantastic theory of the curious habits and customs of those aboriginals who lived in the age of coal. However, if we indulge to speculations of this sort on the bank; of the Blyth, we will never get back to Netherton, its coals and its houses, which is the more immediate object of our paper. Though the old waggonway has passed into a state of decay, age has by no means similarly affected the coal producing capabilities of Netherton itself, and with more power than of yore, both manual and mechanical, it sends out from the valley in which it lies hid ever increasing quantities of coal to feed the insatiable maw of a half satisfied coal market.

Now, however, the colliery waggonway guides the wagons in a different direction, and instead of finding their way to the old place of taller they whirl out of sight in a cloud of dust towards the banks of the more murky Tyne. No! Age, which tames the fire of man, and renders his muscles soft and flaccid, has rather served to develop the resources of Netherton, which, after passing through several hands, is now the property of the Howard West Hartley Coal Company, and the small number of hewers of the half a century ago, and the tiny output of coal replaced by no less than 280 or 300 hewers and an output of from 680 to 700 tons per day.

Two shafts are at work in place of one, and from a small pit village with an infinitesimal population, Netherton has assumed big proportions and boasts a population of some 1,500 souls, the erection of new houses still farther tending to increase the number. Geographically Netherton is three and a half miles south east from Morpeth, and is at least two miles east from the station on the North Eastern Railway which bears the name.

Indeed, Netherton is a district rather than a village, and like many old country places it gives its name to a rather wider tract of country. This is felt as a source of inconvenience by many of the inhabitants of the colliery village, who will persist, for the sake of distinction, in styling their village Nedderton, despite their inability to find any authority for such a name in any geography or directory as yet published.

Let, no misguided traveller who wishes to get to Netherton Colliery be misled by the name of a station on the North Eastern, and book himself thereto, or he will have much walking before he reaches his journey's end. Let him rather for once submit himself to the tender mercies of the Blyth and Tyne Railway Company, and book himself to Choppington station, which is within a mile of his destination.

Warned by experience, we adopted this route, and after a pleasant walk past the picturesque brick house of a successful brickmaker who seems also a man of taste, and through towering hedge rows which fringe the old waggonway, we soon reached the most southern boundary of Netherton Colliery. Being so to speak brought up by the smoky pit heap of the new or Frances shaft, which has been working now for a quarter of a century. This pit absorbs three fourths of the total number of men employed on the colliery, and at present is being worked in three seams, the Bentham, Low Main, and Five Quarter.

Near to this pit we are introduced to the old colliery caller, who has been upon the colliery forty three years, and with the garrulity peculiar to old men, favours us with a few of his recollections. The little old man himself is like a revelation of a bygone age as he toddles up, stick in hand, with ancient hat and tall, surmounting a true swallow tailed coat, one of the olden time. He is evidently proud to be taken for a historian, but prouder still of his "calling", on which he prides himself, and he tears himself away from a flood of old memories to let his hearers know that, "if they divvent git to

work in the mornin it's nut maw felt, as sure aw knock hard eneof; in, begox! aw nivvor leeve the doer till aw git a plain anser fro them, is if they will lie after that they shudden't blame me."

The old man is not a Good Templar, and when he gets a drop too much he grows boastful, and wishes, in real collier fashion, to back himself against any caller in the county, both for the loudness of knocking and the pertinacity with which he knocks. He feels sure he is the champion of Northumberland, and indeed he has been known to alarm the whole row by the ferocity of his attack upon the door of a house bearing the mystic figure three (indicative of the hour at which the inmate wishes to be called) when the said inmate has been away from home.

He beats his first reveille at two in the morning, when he calls the deputies, who must be down at three; again he beats on the doors of the hewers an hour later, winding up with a tremendous tattoo for the lads, who must be down by six; so that the old fellow has no sinecure.

Near the pit heap is a short row of houses ticketed the Frances Row, but better known as the Cross Row, and at right angles from it runs a row or rather a succession of rows, known as the South Row. These are the two oldest rows in the village, and certainly very few worse houses are to be found in the county than some of the back ends in the South Row.

The houses in Cross Row, and half of the houses in South Row, are single houses containing a kitchen and projecting pantry on the ground floor, and an unceiled attic above, the windows being of the very smallest dimensions. With a few exceptions the other houses in South Row consist at the front side of houses which have been originally built for three roomed houses, but the door leading from the front room to the back end or kitchen has been blocked up, and the small low roofed apartment thus stolen from the original building has been converted into a separate dwelling house.

More miserable little cribs than these it is well nigh impossible to imagine. They measure at the most 12 feet by 9, and close to the door runs an open drain, a little beyond which is the odorous ash heap. The brick floors are always damp, and the pantries are overrun with huge grey snails, which creep up and down the open door and over the chairs and tables. Such are the back ends of South Row, good enough perhaps for the invading snails but; much too small, ill ventilated, and altogether miserable for human habitations.

In this row stands the Wesleyan chapel, flanked by a large dwelling house every room of which contains a family and at the bottom of the row stands the Primitive Methodist chapel, its pyramidal slate roof relieved by the blackness of the adjoining pit heap.

Leaving South Row we come to the Yard Row, which is a row very many yards long indeed, and, fortunately, its houses are of a somewhat better description than the hovels we have left. The lower half of this row is strongly suggestive of a gigantic letter V, but the upper portion of the row is perfectly straight houses here are all of brick, each house containing a roomy, comfortable kitchen and pantry on the ground floor, with a ceiled room above of the same size as the kitchen.

This upper room, however, is not furnished with a fireplace which is a pity, for the addition of a small fireplace would have rendered the place much more comfortable than it now is. This, however, is an improvement which might be easily made and if we might hint a further improvement we would any say a partition of lath and plaster, or even of wood, would convert the room into two bed rooms, which, to men with families, would be a much better arrangement than the present one.

Privies and ashpits are provided for this row, and they stand at a respectable distance from the back door. An end house in this row does duty as a Co-operative Store, the room on the ground floor serving as a provision and general goods shop, while two pantries knocked into one form the flour warehouse of the establishment. Notwithstanding these disadvantages however, the society, which is now in the seventh year of its existence seems to prosper in the village. It has upon its books nearly 200 members. Its income last quarter amounted to £2,578. It has £36 invested in the Co-operative Corn Mill, and it paid a dividend of 2s. 6d in the pound.

At the opposite side of the waggonway from the Yard Row is the Howard Row, consisting of fairish houses, with a back kitchen, a front room, and a ceiled attic above, though some of the houses at the high end are minus the back kitchen. Each house has its patch of garden ground, and privies and ashpits are ranged in order down the back side of the row.

In a field behind this row, however, some new houses are in course of erection. It is said there are to be a hundred of them built, and when finished they will undoubtedly be the pride of the village, as each cottage is to contain four rooms. As if in contrast to the new houses, however, and in a corner of the same field, stand two habitations, neither of them fit to live in, but one of them the smallest dwelling place for a full grown man and his wife which our eyes ever beheld.

Tom Thumb's original caravan must have been a mansion to it. The fat boy could not possibly turn himself round in it, and an Irish giant might easily carry it away in one hand under the impression that he had found an eligible breeding cage for a pair of performing canaries. Eight or nine feet long by six broad was this humble dwelling at the very most, and the height of the ridge of the wooden roof from the mud floor could not be more than six feet. The inhabitants of this nice little cabin were a stalwart brickmaker and his wife, and, if I mistake not, a "cur of low degree," who sniffed and barked in a most distrustful manner as though afraid of losing his kennel. Our brickmaker and his spouse were persons of the average size, but looked as ridiculously out of place as Gog and Magog would do in a pony carriage. And the man, as he sat hunkerwise upon the floor munching his supper, was uncommonly suggestive of Gulliver in Lilliput.

Here also is the old pit, with its fiery heap, gamesome putters released from work sporting in the sulphery atmosphere and building up select fires around which they might sit and compare notes as to the events of the day, or snatch quiet puffs from the forbidden pipe. Nearly forty years have the seams of the old pit been ransacked and rifled of their dusty treasures, and the daring miners who have compassed the work have penetrated nearly to the river Blyth at Hartford, a distance of well on for three miles.

It not only contributes one quarter of the total output of the colliery, but it also raises in tubs the greater portion of the water supply of the village, which, though of fairish quality, is very irregular, and though better water than that drained from the fields, it is not so palatable. Away beyond the old pit in what is what is very appropriately termed the Old Row, a very fine example of the old fashioned back to back style of colliery house a sort of arrangement by which one house, as it were, rides pillion with another, though there is none too much room on the horse for one.

We must do the Old Row the justice, however, of saying that it has evidently been intended for a back to back row, and is almost as broad as it is long a virtue which many of the more modern houses of the school do not possess. Their internal arrangements are of the usual type, a brick floored room below and a comfortable garret above. Their outside arrangements are also of the usual sort, an unsightly ash heap and an open drain being the principal features in the landscape to be viewed from the front windows.

Beyond the Old Row are the old pit heaps, old Ironstone and Bob and Joan, or Bobbing Joan (for the etymology it somewhat uncertain), with a few small groups of cottages scattered here and there, some of brick or stone, and some of wood, one wood block in particular containing three small rooms, into

each of which a family is crowded.

We have now completed a somewhat hasty round of Netherton and stand at its northern extremity, about 2½ miles nearly from our starting point at Choppington Station. Twilight is merging fast into darkness, and away to the south and east fiery heaps are casting up a lurid glare to the sky, beginning to brighten as we gaze with the somewhat frosty rays of a bright harvest moon. The chilly closing to a rainy day, however, is no time for prospects or for "moonshine" and we retrace our steps down the old waggonway in company with our guide, from whom we elicit, as it were in cross examination, the fact that there is not yet a school at Netherton Colliery. There is one, it is true, up at Netherton village, built by the Earl of Carlisle. It is a Church school, but many of the colliery children don't go to it. They go to Bedlington or Scotland Gate.

A colliery school is to be built soon, however, in a field near the Co operative Store. There is a newsroom in the village which might be better attended, and which might also have a nobler local habitation.

Some of the dissenting congregations, both here and at Bedlington, are very narrow minded and Puritanical. They set their faces sternly against everything which has a tendency to make young people smile and forget that there is a Hell. Their highest political exercise is that of signing a petition in favour of the Permissive Bill. Consequently, they look upon all active politicians as reprobate, and hold it fatal to a mans salvation if he indulge in cricket, or listen with pleasure to a sentimental song. They have even been known to depose their class leader for some act of the above harmless description and would have none of him because he advocated the political rights the of the working man.

But this sort of thing is not peculiar to Netherton. We have known a young probationer nearer home lose his standing in his Church for daring to stand up and say that a man should not work too long in a factory. That, in fact, nine hours a day was plenty for any man to work.

The moral of this is for the Puritans of Netherton and elsewhere, that we should never undervalue reformers, whether political or otherwise for the Master whom they profess to serve was himself a reformer, and went about trying to destroy abuses.

The men of Netherton, at least many of them, are skilful amateur gardeners. They have a splendid show of their own, but they also go abroad and take prizes even in the uttermost corners of the county. On Saturday last they carried all before them at Newbiggin and ere this is in print they will doubtless have made their mark at Morpeth. A cordial good night to our guide, a flash of lights and a whistle of steam, and Netherton is soon left behind.

13th November 1873

P.S. Since last week we have learned from a correspondent that the reason why the Netherton people style their village Nedderton, is on account of numerous mistakes made by the Post Office officials, who sometimes sent the letters for Netherton Colliery to another netherton near Rothbury, and vice-versa, a state of things which caused the General Post office to alter on their own authority the name of the village to Nedderton. He also says that the old Bob and Joan Pit derived its name from the old form of "gin" used for raising coal when the pit was merely a land-sale one. This "gin" was termed a "Bob gin", from which we get the Bob Gin Pit, and thence by easy stages of corruption it becomes in course of time the Bob and Joan Pit.

