The Author, Christopher Bergen

Christopher Bergen the son of a blacksmith and horseshoer, was born at Whittingham, near

Alnwick on 18th July 1884. His grandfather, Captain John Stanton Bergen, was one of the six

Captain Bergen’s, father and five sons of Blyth, who in the beginning and middle of the last

century made maritime history and with other pioneers established Blyth as a port.

Chris Bergen attended school at Whittingham and Seaton Burn. After leaving school he

served his apprenticeship as a coachbuilder and wheelwright with the firm of Rickards,

Newcastle upon Tyne and then went to work for a motor body building company in Coventry.

On returning north he joined his father in the coach-building and blacksmith business at

Bedlington Station. This he carried on after his father’s death until 1930 when he decided to

try and become a teacher of handicrafts for which he soon qualified, and took up the

appointment at the practical instruction centre at Bedlington Station School. He proved a

capable and enthusiastic instructor and remained there until his death on 30th March 1941. In

his later years he did not enjoy robust health partly due to his service in the Royal Artillery

during the 1914-18 War.

Not only was he a skilled craftsman but also he was an artist and a man of natural intellectual

gifts. Among the subjects he studied, and in some of which he did considerable research,

were astronomy, forestry, local history and the history of the craft guilds. He possessed a

gentle, unassuming nature but was always ready to help anyone who asked him to do

something which he was particularly qualified to carry out and many examples of his

craftsmanship are to be found in Bedlington.

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In 1736 a member of Merchant Adventurers and a Freeman of Newcastle named

Tomlinson obtained a lease of the land in Blyth Dene close to Bedlington with

permission to erect smelting furnaces, to cut down the woods for fuel, and apparently

to dig for iron ore that crops out in the coal measures along the bank of the river.

Small excavations which are the result of digging for iron nodules are still visible near

Kitty Brewster Farm.

The story of these ironworks is the story of the mighty changes revolutionised the

iron trade of this country during the final quarter of the 18th and the first half of the 19th

centuries.

The Rev. Thomas Hodgson, the historian, writing soon after the works had started,

recalls the past loveliness of the scene. Speaking of the old mill of which the ruined

walls and the mill race, were still visible a few years ago (these have lately been

obliterated and are now most unsightly) he says:

‘The mill is where the steep, rocky and woody-sided banks of Blyth Dene begin to

open and slope gently away into the little estuary of the Blyth, but the seclusion and

loveliness of the spot have long since been despoiled of their charms and the noise

and smoke of trade usurped their place,’

The departed loveliness of two centuries ago had almost returned during the past few

years, but the Philistines are upon it again insisting that ugliness shall prevail. ‘These

first ironworks were situated higher up the river than the site with which we are

familiar. There are good reasons for supposing that the forge, at least was on the

south side, on that level piece of ground below Gardener’s Mill, and also that the

furnace, the splitting mills and the nailers shops would be on the north side. The

splitting mills were for splitting iron bar into strips for making nails. This, of course,

was before the process of rolling iron bars had been invented. Nails were all hand

made and quite a colony of nailmakers sprang up in Bedlington.

When the splitting nails were advertised in 1750 and again in 1757, they were to be

sold together with shops for 40 nailers. While I think that this indicates that they

probably made the nails at the works at the beginning they ended by supplying other

nailers in the town itself. An old song goes:

‘Hartley Pans for sailors, Bedlington for nailers.

According to the Blyth historian, Wallace, the master nailers in the town in 1880 were

Ed Charlton, employing 20 hands, Wm and Henry Smith employing 24, Wm Kirkup,

employing 12 hands, and, though he does not say so, Philip Gibson, great grandfather

of the present family of Gibson’s, who have traded down to the year 1930.

Why did Thomlinson invade the quiet beauty of Blyth Dene with his noise and soot?

One ought to show good reason for bringing such discord to the rich woodland,

drowning the rhythmic clack of the ancient mill. It was because of the old method of

smelting and working iron. The trees were used for making charcoal. The water

provided the power to drive the water wheel to force a draught into their oldfashioned

stone furnaces, to drive the water wheel that worked the heavy helve

hammers in the forge, to work the huge bellows during the process of converting pig

iron into wrought iron. We are told by Hodgson that the first axle tree for the water

wheel was of oak and was brought from Winfield Park in Westmorland to Bedlington

by ‘nine of Pickersgill’s strongest horses.’

They needed the water, too, for transport. Here in Blyth Dene was a clear way to the

open sea, the cheapest, easiest, and swiftest methods of transport then known.

Moreover there was iron to be found in the coal measures along the steep river

banks.

They needed those steep banks for another purpose. They filled their old-fashioned

stone furnaces from the top and building them close into the river bank meant easy

access for the carts with the fuel. You will gather the great importance of this when I

tell you that it took in those days 10 tons of fuel to do what 19-cwts. will do now.

Let us picture to ourselves how those early Bedlington ironfounders worked their iron.

First the ore was calcined or roasted to rid it of such impurities as would cause it to

fuse on the side of the furnace: then it was tipped into the furnace between layers of

limestone and charcoal; the furnace was brought to the required heat by a blast of air

being forced into it by huge bellows worked by the water wheel. The ore melted and

descended clear and pure into the bottom of the furnace, the lime helping to form the

slag which floated on top of the liquid ore. The pure iron was tapped and run into

moulds roughly 3ft. by 3in. square.

This was pig iron, hard brittle stuff used for all kinds of moulded work, but totally

unsuitable to be wrought on the anvil.

The pig iron was then taken to the forge reheated in a charcoal fire and pounded

under heavy helve hammers, while a continuous blast of air was poured on it from

the bellows. The oxygen in the air mixed with the carbon in the iron and both passed

off together leaving the iron ductile and tough. These were called billets and could be

forged into short iron bars to be slit up for the nailers, or wrought up into finished

forgings. These, then, would be the methods, adopted by Thomlinson and later by his

successors, Messrs. Mailings & Co. of Sunderland.

At the works were advertised for sale in 1750, and again in 1757, I am assuming that

Mailings occupied them between those dates. They were not successful with them

and appeared to have abandoned smelting altogether.

The iron trade was in a very bad state at this time. Enormous quantities of charcoal

were absolutely indispensible to the carrying on of the trade, but owing to the

depletion of the woods and forests, there were in 1740 only 59 furnaces in all

England and Wales. In spite of the fact that this country was very rich in iron ore, we

were importing four fifths of our iron from Sweden alone, and in addition to this a

certain quantity from Spain, Flanders and America.

The Sussex weald had been the centre of what iron trade we had, but at this period,

1740 to 1780, the number of furnace had dwindled from 10 to only two and the last of

them ceased to operate in 1825.

Perhaps Bedlington Furnace would lie derelict at more than one stage in its history,

but that it did not share the fate of those ancient Sussex foundries was due entirely to

the proximity of coal.

It was the discovery of Abraham Darby, a Shropshire iron master, that coke could be

substituted for charcoal that began the revolution of the iron trade.

That was early in 1730, but, as charcoal was still needed to make wrought iron, the

effect was that the ironworkers could not use up the great quantities of pig iron now

being made.

The invention of the reverberatory furnace, or puddling furnace, though slow in being

perfected, 1760-1764, made the revolution complete. Furnaces were now built near

coal beds instead of woods, and iron was becoming a great national industry.

I have said that in 1740 there were 59 furnaces. In 1788 there were 77 and of those

24 still burned charcoal. In 1826 there were 266, none of which burned charcoal.

In 1788 the output was 61,300 tons; in 1828 it was 417,566 tons.

The geographical effect was amazing. For instance, in Wales, where there had been

only 11 furnaces, there were now 90.

And so Bedlington Furnace, instead of fading out came into more vigorous life

because of the coal that was found in the very cliff from which they had chosen to

dump their fuel. These great changes as well as the introduction of the new process

of rolling iron bars instead of the new process of rolling iron bars instead of forging

them would occur during the control of the next tenants, Wm. Hawkes and his brother

in law, Thos. Longridge, both of Gateshead.

Hawkes of Gateshead, were famous ironmasters and the Works were generally

developed and improved under this firm. They were no longer content to make

spades and shovels and supply the nailers with iron slits. They made heavy forgings

for the busy shipwrights down at Blyth; they exported iron goods to London; they

became noted for iron anchors.

The works were advertised in 1782 in these terms:

‘To be sold, the splitting mills, warehouses, smith’s shops, dwelling house, farm of

land with a dwelling house and warehouse situate at Watson’s Quay contigous to the

Blyth river, all of which 53 will be unexpired on May Day next. These works are

capable of executing 500 tons of rod iron and iron hoops in one year, and are well

situated as to coal and the receipt and shipping of iron, being only one mile from the

navigable port of Blyth, to which port iron may be brought from London on the most

reasonable terms.’

From Hawkes and Longridge the concern passed to Biddulph and Gordon, of

London. It is difficult to decide when their ownership began or ended. Wallace says

that they held them for 50 years. In that case they must have acquired them at the

sale just mentioned, but in the ‘New County History.’ Mr Forster, quoting ‘The

Industrial Resources of the Tyne, Tees and Wear,’ says they acquired them in 1809.

This, of course, makes Wallace’s statement impossible. They certainly did hold them

in 1829. The clock house appears to have been built by them, a stone over the door

being carved with the date 1829, the initials of ‘G & B’ and a Latin inscription

‘VIVITUR IGNE ET AQUA ET FERRO DEO FAVENTE,’ of which a rough rendering

would be: ‘We live by fire and water and iron and God’s favour’.

It is just as certain that if Biddulph & Gordon were the owners, their manager was

Michael Longridge, a son of the previous Thos. Longridge’s cousin. Another relative

of this Thos. Longridge to come in Bedlington at this time was his brother in law,

John Gooch.

Sir Daniel Gooch, in his diary, says that his father, John Gooch, came to Bedlington

because his cousins, the Longridges and Hawkes, with a Mr Sorby of Linden had

aquired the ironworks. Sir Daniel was born at Bedlington in 1816.

Whosoever the owners were, Michael Longridge’s power seems to have been

paramount and we can safely assume that the fine solid buildings, with an

architectural beauty that one does not usually associate with an engineering factory,

were erected under his supervision. His coat of arms was carved on one of the

cottages next to the Clockhouse.

The development of the port of Blyth was an important factor in the history of the

works. Keels plied regularly up to the ironworks from the port and many forgoings

would find their way to the shipbuilding yards where famous brigs were being built.

Ships drawing four feet of water could get right up at full tide and a boat plied

regularly to the well near Kitty Brewster Farm to replenish the ships with water.

George Stephenson was a regular visitor in the works at this period. He used to call

upon John Gooch at what is now known as ‘the King’s Arms’, or, more familiarly, ‘The

Grapes’. Sir Daniel tells us how as a boy, George Stephenson used to take him on

his knee and tell him about the wonderful new railways, or ‘waggonways’ as he would

call them.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter in the whole history of the ironworks is that

which tells of the part they played in the development of the iron road.

In 1818 the owner or owners of Willowbridge Pit, of the ‘Glebe’ Pit, now known as

Barrington, offered Michael Longridge coal on very favourable terms if he would be at

the expense of putting down a waggonway from the pit to the ironworks.

He agreed to do so and began to consider the advisability of putting down rolled iron

rails instead of the usual cast iron ones.

There had sprung up quite a trade in these cast iron rails. They were very short, only

three feet long and were fastened down at each joint with a chair fixed to a stone

sleeper. They were ‘fish bellied;, that is, they were deeper at the middle than at the

ends, but, they had a nasty habit of jumping clean out of their best features were that

they presented a good broad surface to the wheel and were comparatively cheap in

price.

The malleable iron rail to give the same surface was going to be very heavy and

correspondingly expensive. Narrow malleable iron rails had been tried at Walbottle

and elsewhere and had been only a partial success, the fault being that they wore

groves in the tyres of the wheels.

Mr. Birkenshaw, chief agent to the iron company, suggested that the rails might be

rolled wedged shaped in section, so that they might be given a good depth to stiffen

them, present a good broad surface to the wheel and yet be light in weight and price.

Accordingly special rolls were designed and the new type of rail rolled. The line was

laid and was a great success.

About this time, 1820, Longridge advised Stephenson to become a partner with

Thomas Mason in the ownership of Willowbridge Pit and Stephenson did so.

The following year, Stephenson, who had been appointed engineer to the projected

Stockton and Darlington Railway, was greatly exercised as to what type of rail to

employ. It was perhaps, the most difficult question that the whole scheme presented.

An unsatisfactory locomotive might be replaced easily enough, but to lay down miles

and miles of faulty line would be a very serious matter indeed. He himself was

interested with a Mr. Losh in the manufacture of cast iron rails, but he decided on the

Birkenshaw patent malleable fail. Mr. Losh was greatly angered by this, as were

other shareholders interested in the cast iron business.

Losh wrote to Ed. Pease in 1821 and said that Stephenson had recommended the

Bedlington rail because Michael Longridge was his best customer for his

WIllowbridge Coal and also because he dealt extensively with Stephenson for chairs

and metal work:

‘In the long intercourse I have had with the world,’ he wrote ‘I have found most

people to lean to their own interests and I do not think George Stephenson an

exception.’

Michael Longridge refers to these insinuations in a letter he wrote to Ed. Pease on

November 14th 1821. After saying he will not allow another manufacturer to roll the

new type of rail, he comments on Losh’s letter:

‘I am sorry to learn from my honest friend Stephenson, that another person has been

attempting to injure him in your estimation. I trust you have had sufficient knowledge

of him to form a just opinion. Without troubling you with my sentiments as to the

conduct of the other party, I will only say that I have no concern in any foundry

whatever, consequently, Stephenson can have no share in the malleable iron rail

belonging to me, nor have I offered him any commission or premium on the amount

of rails sold.’

Edward Pease and his friends had already formed an opinion of Stephenson’s

character which Mr. Losh was little likely to shake. It was agreed that all the main

lines should be laid with Bedlington rails and the sidings with cast iron.

Stephenson was not alone in his opinion of the merits of the Bedlington rail. William

James the ‘father’ of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, waxed almost lyrical in

its praise:

‘Light has a length shone from the north,’ he wrote in 1821, ‘and I pronounce it as my

decided opinion that the malleable iron railroad at Bedlington is by far the best I have

ever seen, both in respect of its material and its form.’

Writing in September of the same year to a friend in Durham, Robert Stephenson

said ‘Perhaps the best example of this kind of railway is to be found at Bedlington,

where Mr. Longridge has laid about three miles of it.’

The Official History of the North Eastern Railway says:

‘The importance of this (the Barrington) waggonway as a actor in the evolution of the

iron road can scarcely be over estimated’.

At the bottom of Mr. Graham’s garden at Bedlington Station near where Blyth bus

stops, can be seen two hedges. Might I suggest that some form of memorial be

placed there with an inscription to this effect: Between these hedges was laid down in

1820 the railway that solved the difficulties of the railway pioneers and became the

pattern for the chief railways of Britain.

Sir Daniel Gooch records with considerable pride how, when taking over Stratfordon-Avon

railway for the Great Western, he found that the rails had been rolled at

Bedlington in 1830. He had a sample sent to his home at Clewer Park with instruction

that they had to be preserved as a relic of the early railway history.

The first rails were rolled 9ft long and appear to have been parallel. It was upon the

advice of Mr. John Buddle that they were deepened between the chairs again and so

became like three cast iron rails joined together. Let us walk into the factory and see

them rolled. A letter from Ohio, USA written by one who served his apprenticeship at

Bedlington, describes the scene. He tells us that the rails had to be marked with

white paint at the proper place to enter the material if they missed they rolled a 6ft

instead of a 9ft one. The big spur wheel had wooden teeth, and it is a common thing

to see half of them tripped off owing to the iron being put in too cold. This writer does

not appear to know that in 1825 they were rolling these fish-bellied rails 15ft long. He

goes on to say that when the parallel rails were introduced with the double face the

old fish-bellied ones were sent to the furnace to be worked up. ‘I went there to work

in 1845 and often saw the standards and the rolls for splitting the nail rods and

wished I could have seen them working.’

It was somewhere about this time, 1820, that the ironworks acquired or established

the iron pit at Nedderton. They built two new blast furnaces on the north side of the

river and they used a mixture of this Nedderton ore and an ironstone brought to the

river Blyth from the Yorkshire coast known as ‘Whitney Stone’. Twenty years later,

Mr. Longridge leased the pit we have called Willowbridge or the ‘Glebe’ from Lord

Barrington, from whom it afterwards seems to have taken its name.

During these past twenty years Bedlington Iron Works had been quietly dropping

their nailsplitting and concentrating more and more on locomotive building and

railway material. A Mr. Rennie, another American correspondent gives an interesting

glimpse of his prentice days in the works in 1848:

‘I went to work at the forge that worked with the water wheel and made slabs for

boiler plates, and on one occasion being short of scrap, we used up all the old chain

makers anvils.’

We have all heard of Stephenson’s famous ‘Rocket’ but what do we know of its

runner up at the famous trial at Rainhill? I mean Timothy Hackworth’s ‘Sans Pareil’. It

was a wonderful engine and was going strong when all its erstwhile rivals were either

scrapped or had been remade over and over again. The boiler, at least, was made at

Bedlington Ironworks.

They still retained a considerable amount of Admiralty work in cable chain and

anchors. They were famous for their anchors and, at the great Exhibition of 1851,

exhibited an anchor weighing 5 tons and by its side one weighing 2 cwts. Two

cruisers built at Jarrow in 1888, the ‘Orlando’ and the ‘Undaunted’, were fitted with

Bedlington anchors made as far back as 1846 and 1852 respectively. These anchors

weighed just over 3 ½ tons.

Biddulph and Gordon had taken a lease on that part of the dene between the bridge

and the Rose and Crown Inn in 1829 and in 1838. Longridge built an up-to-date

locomotive factory on the site.

The engine builders styled themselves R. B. Longridge & Co. and were under the

direction of Robert Bewick Longridge, Michael’s fourth son. They had built a few

engines previous to this, but they now built them in a big way.

About 150 engines from Bedlington have been traced in the books of old British

Railways, 10 to Belgium, 4 to Holland, 8 to Germany, 1 to France and 1 to Austria, in

most cases the first locos these countries possessed. The first locos these countries

possessed. The first loco to leave King’s Cross when it was opened in 1853 was built

by R. B. Longridge & Co. there were many more than these, the records between

1841-5 being completely lost.

I have been fortunate to procure a photograph of what must surely be the last of

these in operation built in 1852.It was still running at Holy Head Harbour in 1905 and

was probably the last broad gauge engine in use.

Towards the middle of the century the firm was at its fullest capacity, employing

nearly 2000 hands besides a number of premium apprentices paying for the

privilege, sons of well to do families from all over Britain and abroad, Germany,

France and Holland sending young men to be trained at Bedlington.

The Bedlington Ironworks were equipped with blast furnaces, rolling mills,

engineering, boiler and locomotive shops, gas making plans, an iron pit, a small

brewery for their workmen, a workmen’s institute, with a fine library of nearly 400

books, and even an ice making plant.

Bedlington Ironworks had an international reputation for the reliability of their engines

and the quality of their rolled iron. In fact, Rennie says, ‘It was ‘nip and tuck’ with the

Lowmoor Iron Co. for the premier place in Britain for ‘Crown’ sheets and Tyre bars.’

The first wire-bound gun was invented and made at Bedlington. It was made by

Michael Longridge’s son, James Atkinson Longridge. The present Michael Longridge,

in a letter to ‘The Engineer’ as recently as 1921, states that he was present as a child

at experiments made with gun in the Low House. He remembers it in its lathe in an

upper room of the works office with the wires hanging out of the windows with

weights attached to keep them at the calculated tension.

I remember,’ he sats, ‘the gun being fired across the river. The breech was jammed

against a wall. After firing it was sent to Ordnance who, although cautioned to stick

the breech against a wall, persisted in securing the gun to a large log of wood by the

flange of the muzzle. The consequence of course, was that, on firing, the recoil tore

away the flange and the wire wound gun was dammed for many years until the

Russian Government, more enterprising than our own, constructed one successfully.

And now, for something of the social condition of the workers. As far back as 1810

they had established a relief fund by which they bound themselves to pay 3d a week

There were 15 members at first, in 1824 they had 112 workers. The benefits were 8/-

per week for six months sickness and 3/6 per week as long as they were unable to

work; £5 on death of a member and funeral benefits of £2 per member, £3 for wife,

£2 for widow and 30/- for child. Their annual meeting was held in the Clock House

and was made the occasion of dinner given by the management.

In 1839 they actually launched a monthly journal entitled ‘The Blyth & Bedlington

Literary Supplement’ and though I am strongly tempted to quote much from the one I

have seen, I will content myself with these extracts from an editorial note: ‘Few large

establishments like this one can boast of a better regulated set of workmen. No

means have been left unemployed to make them comfortable.’

It refers to their valuable little library and recent additions to it, and finishes in this

whimsical manner: ‘We can only regret that so splendid a collection of musical

instruments should be neglected and left in the band room to spoil. We perceive that

the music master has the pleasure of attending every fourteen days merely to receive

his money and whistle to the wind.’ This sounds as though the men were fairly

comfortable down in Blyth Dene considering that all around them there was grave

unrest amongst the workers. The Chartist movement was at its height and the

‘hungry forties’ were already laying their clammy fingers over England.

A great rendezvous for the local Chartists was the Windmill Inn Cowpen, and so

ominous did the Government consider Cowpen that they send General Colin

Campbell (afterwards of Crimean and Indian Mutiny fame) with a regiment of

Highlanders and billeted them there.

To say that Chartism did not effect the ironworks would be untrue. An entry in the

absentee book (now in the possession of Mr. J. G. Hudson) on July 8th 1839 refers to

the ‘Number of men who only wrought one quarter and left at breakfast time

yesterday morning on account of the arrest of George Julian Harvey.’

Harvey was a noted Chartist leader who was arrested for a seditious speech at

Manchester while he was speaking Bedlington Market Cross.

Later entries in this book show that the feeling in the Engine Factory was strong

enough to close it for two days at the beginning of a peculiar Chartist demonstration

known as the ‘Sacred Month’ Aug. 12th, 1839. Monday. No work today on account of

the commencement of the sacred month-first day’s fast. Tuesday, Aug. 13th. Factory

not open today-second day’s fast.’

Mr Longridge received threatening letters purporting to come from his own workmen

and he took occasion to address the whole of the employees on the matter:

‘I do not believe there is a word of truth in the letter; he said, and I think so for three

reasons. Firstly, because I have done harm to none of you; secondly, because I

believe you are convinced that I wish sincerely to promote your welfare; thirdly,

because you could not injure me without injuring your families.’

He posted copies of the letter up in the works and added this footnote:

‘Mr Longridge thanks the author of this letter for his friendly warning and advises the

workmen who are not satisfied with the treatment to leave the manufactory.’

The workmen called a meeting and sent Mr. Longridge a dignified reply declaring

their innocence of any conspiracy against him and demanding that he should show

them the original letter and help them to trace the writer.

In a speech to his employees on June 21st, 1839 he said:

‘I claim for myself civil and religious liberty. I reprobate tyranny if it is exercises by a

proud aristocracy or a rabble democracy. What I claim for myself I willingly allow to

others. I do not stand as an advocate for Tories, Whigs, or Radicals, or Chartists but

I am a lover of my country and warmly attached to its constitution, I know that as a

nation, we are proverbial for grumbling. For half a century I have listened to those

grumblings and have felt disposed to look for a happier country, but I must own that I

do not know where to find it this side of the grave. I do not wish to persuade you that

there is nothing in the state of England that needs amending. Many amendments

might be made which would improve both your position and my own.’

He gives a list of things which might be amended; The Church of England,

international finance and the monetary system, the Corn Laws, the system of internal

communication and education.

Long before all this Mr. Longridge had made arrangements to deal with any violence

caused by or offered to the inhabitants of Bedlington. In a letter written in 1832 he

gives these instructions:

‘When the alarm is given the men here come to my house; those at Sleekburn to the

Pit; those at Bedlington to the officer commanding there. The men with guns or

pistols must not fire without order and in this case fire by diversions and according to

the officer’s orders. Fire low, so as to lame but not to kill. The men with swords and

bludgeons to make prisoners of the ringleaders, but not to break rank until ordered.

Be cool and steady.’

Michael Longridge appears to have been a man of great business ability. He joined

with George and Robert Stephenson and Edward Pease in founding the firm of

Robert Stephenson and Co. of Forth Banks, Newcastle who became the foremost

locomotive builders of the world. Both George and Robert Stephenson were

repeatedly called away for long periods from the works surveying and attending to

other matters incidental to the construction of new railroads, bridge, etc. Robert being

in America for a long time.

During these periods, Michael Longridge managed both Bedlington and the Forth

Banks firms. He may have been a Martinet; he certainly provoked some enmity of an

underground character, which was constantly blossoming’ forth into spiteful

anonymous letters both to himself and to his friends.

Referring to one of these letters received by his friend Thos. Richardson, objecting to

Mr. Longridge’s management of the works at Newcastle, he makes this revealing

reply:

‘I will state my reasons for being concerned in engine building with George and

Robert Stephenson. George has rendered me very considerable service in giving an

opinion favourable to the Bedlington rails which his own interests led him to

recompense the pecuniary loss he sustained, but I have since done what in me lay to

forward his interest and Robert’s. It was against my will they commenced as engine

builders but after they had begun, considering it beneficial to the Bedlington

Ironworks and that George and Robert would benefit from my habits of business in

which they were both deficient, I offered to take part with them. Most assuredly I

never intended to have the slightest charge of the manufactory further than attending

the monthly meeting of the partners. Circumstances have unfortunately places the

responsibility on my shoulders, but I hope that Robert’s early return to England will

relieve me. Meanwhile, if you or Mr. Pease can appoint a more suitable person, it will

much oblige. Your truly, M. L.’

The softer side of this nature is revealed in the really affectionate letters which

passed between Robert Stephenson and himself. They evidence quite a tender

regard for the brilliant young engineer. On Nov. 2nd, 1825 he writes asking Robert to

become godfather to his youngest child:

‘My imagination pictures the time when, seated around my fireplace at Bedlington

Ironworks, my own head still more silvered o’er with age than it is now, I shall see

you with your goddaughter sitting on your knee listening to the traveller’s tale which

you promise, for I shall regret if you suppress any real occurrence that befell you. I

would rather give some licence to high colouring than to have a bare detail of dates

and journeyings. I feel tonight as though I were talking to you and can hardly bring

my pen to narrate such common matter of fact subjects as that we continue to be

overwhelmed with business at Bedlington Works.’

In Horton Church, just inside the chancel is an imposing memorial to an engineer

named Reid. He was at one time work’s manager for Robert Longridge. His nephew

presented a portrait in oils to the Y. M.C.A. at Bedlington Station.

One of the great sights of the district at the time of the engine works was when a

locomotive had been completed. It had to be dragged up to the steep Bebside bank

of the river by a great team of horses, hired from all the farmers round about. It was

generally taken from the to Brandling junction for dispatching to any great distance.

Severe competition in locomotive building proved that Bedlington had been nursing

the very arm that at the last would smite them low. It was easier now to move 200

tons from the north to the Midlands than it was for Bedlington Ironworks to drag their

locomotives up on to the high road. It became less important that ironworks should

be even near to the coal mines and the advantage of river-bourne freights enjoyed by

the Bedlington firm was made to look insignificant. The ironworks near the main

railways were able to effect economies in the cost of transport. They were able to

bear forges like Bedlington out of the market.

Thanks however to the same fact, they could also beat our foreign competitors’ and

give country a further supremacy in the world markets.

Mr. J. G. Hudson, to whom I am indebted for so much information regarding the

works, preserves a pay note for May 5th, 1855, which shows that the wages were

paid fortnightly, the recipient in this case receiving 5/3 per day, with a deduction of 8/-

per fortnight for rent. Other items on the note but not deducted in this case are Coals,

Doctor and School.

The school stood on a slight eminence still discernable near the path midway through

the ‘free’ wood.

It was in the year 1853 that the Longridge family finally finished with the ironworks.

Michael Longridge died five years later in 1853, aged 73. He, was buried on the north

side of Bedlington Church. Here also were buried his wife, mother-in-law, six of his

descendants and the wife of Robert Bewick Longridge.

Robert Bewick Longridge lived to the ripe age of 93, dying in 1914. The publication of

this account of the Ironworks in the press some years ago brought me into

correspondence with the gentleman’s eldest son, Robert Chas Longridge. We kept

up this correspondence till the time of his death about 2 years ago. He told me how

his grandmother and Vicar Cotes used to go around vaccinating the Bedlington

people. He remembered his Grandfather’s funeral. He was a small boy but never

forgot the big black crape with the huge bow that he wore in his cap. He had the

impression that the Longridge’s left Bedlington under a cloud of suspicion by Mr.

Hudson and I assured him that people have revered the name of Longridge.

There was a large sale of material and plant and the concern passed in to the hands

of a Mr. Spence. I had the privilege of conducting this gentleman’s grandson over the

runs a few years ago.

Mr. Spence soon decided to clear out and another sale, which lasted ten days, began

on May 21st, 1855. Among the items, some of you will be interested to know, was one

which showed that there were still ten barrels and sixty half-barrels of ale left in the

brewery. This beer, I aught to have told you, was known as ‘Swanky’ and was not

ordinary beer, but a mild brew not likely to intoxicate.

In 1861 Messrs. Mounsey and Dixon took over the works. This last phase is within

living memory and I have talked with many who remember Mr. Mounsey and his

unfortunate young wife. She was trapped into the machinery by her shawl, it is said,

and met a frightful death. The notice in the press reads:

‘Feb 1st, 1862. A terrible fatality at Bedlington Ironworks. Last night a messenger

from Bedlington Ironworks arrived at Shields by the Blyth and Tyne Railway and

passed on to Sunderland with the appalling intelligence that Mrs Mounsey, wife of

one of the proprietors of the works, had been literally torn to pieces by machinery.

Mr. and Mrs. Mounsey, with Mr. Dixon and several ladies had gone into the new mills

to see the process of sawing iron. Mrs. Mounsey’s dress got entangled in the

machinery and she was drawn in and frightly mangled.’

Mr Edward Gibson has told me that his father was wont to say the Mr Mounsey came

to Bedlington with a pocket full of money and a beautiful wife and that he left broken

hearted without either.

Mounsey had money and Dixon had the brains is the way the survivors of the works

generally sum them up when I have talked with them. Neither the money nor the

brains, however, sufficed to bring the ironworks back to their former prosperity.

The firm was changed from Mounsey & Co. to Bedlington Iron Co. in 1865, but they

closed down finally in 1867.

Thus ended 130 years of wonderful and eventful industrial activity.

Notable men connected with the works have been Sir Daniel Gooch, who in 1866 laid

the first successful Atlantic Cable, laying in all three cables across the Atlantic. Daniel

Gooch became Superintendent of the Great Western Railway at the early age of 21.

He became an ardent advocate of the broad gauge railway, that is 7ft across

compared with 4ft 9inches narrow.

Gooch and George Stephenson fought a bitter battle with each over the merits of the

broad gauge, ‘I shall never forget the passion of George Stephenson this day,’ he

writes, ‘he gave me his mind pretty freely for fighting the broad gauge against the

narrow in which he said I had been brought up,’ They were thinking of Bedlington

where Daniel used to sit on George’s knee.

John Dixon made railway history too. He laid down the first Chinese Railway, a

difficult task as the hostile natives were continually tearing it up again, the Mandarins

complaining, with a great deal of truth no doubt, that the noise was disturbing the

spirits of their ancestors Dixon was a capable artist and an expert geologist. He

discovered water on the rock of Gibraltar and was thanked by the British Government

as they had previous to this to get it from the mainland. He built Hammersmith

Bridge.

His most spectacular achievement was to bring Cleopatra’s Needle to the Thames

Embankment, previous attempts to move it had only shifted it a few feet. This

massive stone, the largest quarried stone in Britain is ten times heavier than the

largest stone in Stonehenge and is 70 feet long.

Dixon encased the stone in a steel cylinder shaped like a bost with bridge and rudder

and towed it as far as the Bay of Biscay where they encountered a severe storm.

Efforts to save the ‘Cleopatra’ as the strange barque was called cost brave men’s

lives and finally they had to cut it adrift. This news caused alarm in many people’s

breast in England, especially those of a superstitious nature. Three days later the

‘Fitzmaurice’ sighted the Cleopatra and towed her into Vigo harbour. Finally it was

brought into the Thames and set up on the embankment.

Here are some interesting figures concerning the power required to set those huge

stones on end. Fontana setting one up in Rome in 1786, employed 960 men, 40

capstans and 75 horses. Le Bas erecting one in Paris in 1836 used 480 men and 10

capstans. Dixon set the London obelisk up with 18 men and 6 hydraulic jacks.

The Times on October 10th 1878 said that Dixon had ‘shown an engineering skill

which had eclipsed all former attempts in the same direction.’

There is no country in which those who have successfully completed so great an

enterprise and not received from the Government as a matter of course, some single

mark of national appreciation and such a reward if it were conferred would be

confirmed by the public.’

Dixon did not get a Knighthood. Durham University conferred the honorary degree of

M.A. upon him. He died at Croydon in 1891 in poor circumstances for the Needle

was a financial disaster to him.

Another man who can scarcely be passed over was Joshua Miller the old keelman

who for so many years was a familiar figure on the River Blyth, making countless

journeys between the ironworks and the harbour. He was born at Wickham on 25th

October 1761 and lived to the great age of 110 years and 8 months, dying at

Morpeth, 24th April 1872. In his 100th year he was still in harness and was gatekeeper

when Mounsey and Dixon took over. He began his working life as a Tyne keelman

but was pressed for the Navy and fought in our wars against France under Nelson.

He served on the ‘Pomona’ and once picked up a shell that had struck the deck and

threw it overboard. In the photograph he is shown with the bust of Napoleon, his

erstwhile enemy.

He was regarded by all as one of the institutions of the factory and many stories are

told of him. It is related how at the annual dinner at the institute, the men who usually

took this opportunity to play pranks, solemnly charged Joshua with making

disrespectful remarks about one of the officials. They empanelled a jury and brought

in a verdict of guilty. They ordered Jossy to withdraw and apologise or to take a large

dose of salts. He elected to take the salts and it was often averred by the men that

this was the cause of his longevity. Owing to a defect in his teeth he contracted a

habit of mis-pronouncing his p’s and k’s and in narrating one of his adventures during

the war when his ship was in peril of foundering he exhorted his mates to ‘Punch, ye

buggers Punch, or ye’ll awl shink’ So the apprentices and boys used to say ‘Heres

awd ‘Punch or Shink’ coming.’

He was a great favourite however and a letter from Brisbane from an old worker in

the factory, describes him in these words: ‘I remember his figure well gnarled and

weather beaten, hard as a steel nut, with the indelible stamp of a son of the sea

written on every feature. I have seen this old son of Neptune on a wild winter

morning with his legs bare up to the knee wade to his keel lying aground in shallow

water covered with ice. In the ‘50s he lived in Keelman’s Row with a relative named

Ben Lee. Was it to be wondered that our ships manned with such hard staunch

hearts as Jossy’s should win such renown.’

Little now remains of the old factory. We can still see the position of the weirhead

which was washed away in November 1886. The last chimney was felled in 1906,

and the clock tower removed as late as 1915. At present all that remains of the once

fine engine works on the south side of the river is crumbling to complete ruin.

During the Great War the Germans passed over the place in a Zepplin and reported

that though they had not bombed Blyth because of its unimportance, ‘Bedlington

however, which was bombarded, possesses ironworks’ and, says the report, ‘This

fight has proved that the great works around the Tyne can at any time be threatened

by our ships.’

No bombs, however, dropped into Blyth Dene and we have the doubtful satisfaction

of knowing that the present frightfulness in that naturally lovely Dene is the work of

our own people who cannot officially be least, be termed our enemies.