

JEREMIAH DIXON (1733-1779)-A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

H. W. ROBINSON

Lately Librarian of the Royal Society of London

Many new facts relating to Jeremiah Dixon have come to light and now that a connected account of the principal events in his life has been obtained, it seems worthwhile to record it. Dixon was Mason's companion and colleague at the observation of the Transit of Venus in 1761 at the Cape of Good Hope. He will also be remembered for his work with Mason on the boundary line between Maryland and Pennsylvania.

The family of Dixon in Durham County, England, was an extensive one and was a branch of the Longstaffs (Langstaffs) of Teesdale. Many members of the family bore the same Christian names and this has caused some confusion, as also have the intermarriages and other ramifications. These have misled some historians, and erroneous statements, conclusions, and traditions regarding the family have appeared in the printed local histories. The father of Jeremiah has been described as of various professions. In many references he is mentioned as the famous butler of Raby Castle, whereas, in fact, it was his uncle who held that position. Other mistakes have been made with regard to Jeremiah -- the statements that he "was one of the inventors of coal-gas" and that he "invented many appliances for use in mines" must be discounted. They should be attributed to his well known brother, George Dixon. From the evidence available it appears that Jeremiah Dixon was not interested in coal mining. He was a practical man who had a profound knowledge of mathematics which he applied to his skill in mechanics. He was a surveyor of outstanding merit and a good draughtsman.

Jeremiah Dixon was born at Bishop Auckland on 27 July 1733. He died unmarried at Cockfield on 22 January 1779 and was buried at, the Friends' Burial Ground, Staindrop, in Durham County. His will, dated 27 December 1778 was proved at Durham in 1779 his father was George Dixon of Cockfield (1701-1755) and, he was a coal mine owner. He died on 3 December 1755. His will was dated 8 November 1755 and it was proved at Durham in 1759. It read as follows:

Will of George Dixon of Cockfield, Yeoman. To eldest son George Dixon my freehold House and garth, situate in Cockfield, after the decease of my wife Mary. I charge the above premises with the sum of £30 to my daughter Elizabeth Dixon. My freehold House with appurtenances in Newgate Street, Bishop Auckland, to my wife and after her death, to my two sons Jeremiah and Ralph. My copyhold House close, situate at Cockton Hill near Bishop Auckland to daughter Hannah Dixon and her heirs. Residue to wife and son George, and appoint them Executors

The mother, Mary Hunter (1694~1773) came from Newcastle. She has been described as of the "small shoe" and is said to have been the "cleverest woman" that ever married into her husband's family. It is at least certain that marked ability showed itself in her children. Born on 11 August 1694, she married George Dixon on 28 February 1724 and died on 16 January 1773 Her will, dated 20 August 1763, was proved at

Durham in 1774. There were seven children of this union.

It is known that Jeremiah received his early education at John Kipling's' School at Barnard Castle and it was here that he first became interested in mathematics and astronomy. Apparently he did not think much of the teaching at the school for when later examined at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich he is reported to have stated that his seat of learning was "a pit cabin upon Cockfield Fell."

From the time when Jeremiah left school until 1760 we must assume that he had some training in surveying work and it was then that he decided to adopt this work for his profession.

He had from an early age made the acquaintance of, many eminent men (all, of kindred genius) who emanated from South Durham in the eighteenth century. He was on very intimate terms William Emerson; the celebrated mathematician of Hursworth

County Durham, and also with John Bird of Bishop Auckland, the well-known mathematical instrument maker. Thomas Wright, natural, philosopher, was a member of this group and he must have had some influence upon Dixon.

In all probability John Bird, who was an active Fellow of the Royal Society, recommended Dixon as a suitable companion to accompany Mason. According to records existing in the family, Dixon was examined at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich before he was appointed. A search of the minute books of the Ordnance Board (a body which among other activities governed the Academy has been made, but no mention of any such examination has been found. It is quite likely that the interview was a personal one in order to satisfy the Royal Society that Dixon was a suitable man for the work.

There is a family tradition and it has appeared in print on many occasions that Dixon wore military uniform from 1760 until his death consisting of a long red coat and a cocked hat. This story must be wrong, as his name does, not appear in any army lists and he was never in any way connected with the army. One account mentions that he wore the uniform' of the Royal Engineers. The engineers attached to the army in those days were civilians and they had no uniform. Dixon merely adopted as ordinary dress a long red coat and as so many people of the period did a cocked hat. This has led historians to assume that he either held commissioned rank or that he wore military uniform ' without permission. A "long red coat and cocked' hat" had no significance.

Although a recognized Quaker and a member of a large family of Quakers, Jeremiah's behavior was not all it should have been, for the following entry appears in the Quaker Minute Book of Raby; under the date of 28 October 1760: Jery Dixon', son of George and Mary Dixon of Cockfield disowned for drinking to excess.

In this he had apparently inherited a family weakness, for his father on many occasions repented of his "loathsome practice of Gitting too much Drink."^[1] This was the period when gin drinking was at its height and it may be that the habit acquired by both father and son undermined their health so much as to lead to their early deaths.

Dixon went with Mason to observe the Transit of Venus in 1761 at the Cape of Good Hope and from there they journeyed on to St. Helena to join the 'Rev. Nevil Maskelyne. They all eventually returned to England in 1762. It is presumed that between this time and the time when they again left England Dixon returned to his home where he may have enjoyed a holiday. The two men, Mason and Dixon, left England again in 1763 to go on a special mission on behalf of Mr. Penn and Lord Baltimore to measure the boundary line between Maryland and Pennsylvania. They returned once again to England in 1768, only to find that the Royal Society required their services to observe the Transit of Venus of 1769. Mason, this time went to Ireland, whilst Dixon was sent to the Is-land of Hammerfest. Particulars of the work that these two men performed on behalf of the Royal Society are given in the *Philosophical Transactions*.

A story is told that one day, whilst in America, Dixon came across a slave driver mercilessly beat-ing a poor black woman . Going up to him he said: "Thou must not do that !" He received the curt answer: "You be d.....d.! Mind your own business." Dixon's reply was: "If thou doesn't desist I'll thrash thee!" Then righteous wrath overcame his Quaker principles. He was a tall and powerful man, and an imposing figure, so without more ado he seized the slave-driver's whip and with it gave him the sound thrashing that he richly deserved. Dixon kept the whip as a trophy and took it back with him to Cockfield, where it was long regarded as a family treasure.

Returning to his native place after his expedition to Hammerfest, Dixon resumed his work as a surveyor. Like many member's of his family he was a fine draughtsman and evidence of this is shown in a magnificent piece of penmanship on vellum entitled "A plan of the Park' and Demesnes at Auckland Castle, belonging to The Right Rev'd. Father in God, John Egerton Lord Bishop of Durham. Taken in 1772 by Jere. Dixon." This now hangs in Auckland Castle. It was purchased and presented to the Bishop of Durham by Mr. Waynham Dixon.

Among other places which were surveyed and measured by Dixon was Lanchester Common or Moor, the largest in the county of Durham. This work was done in 1773.

The Theodolite used by Dixon for his work in America is in the Museum of the Royal Geographical Society in London. It was presented by Mr. Edward Dixon of Hull a descendant the family.

In the *Newcastle Courant* of 30 January 1779 appeared the following announcement of Dixon's death Last week at Cockfield, near Staindrop, Mr. Jeremiah Dixon: a gentleman eminently distinguished for his

mathematical knowledge.

His Will read as follows:

1778 Dec. 27, Will of Jeremiah Dixon of Cockfield Co. Durham, gentleman. I devise my copyhold houses, garth, garden, dye-houses and premises within the manor of Bondgate in Auckland to my good friend John Raylton and his heirs upon trust and for the benefit of Margaret Bland, and I further desire that any profits becoming due from these premises shall go towards the maintenance of the two daughters of the said Margaret Bland, namely Mary and Elizabeth, until 21 at which age the said copyholds are to go to them equally. I devise unto my brother Ralph Dixon my freehold dwelling houses, dye-houses, garden and premises in Staindrop. The residue to my sister Elizabeth Dixon and her heirs, and appoint her sole Executrix. [Proved Durham 1779]

I am indebted to my friend, Mr. Arthur' Douglas of Hull, for his kindly interest in enquiries addressed to him and through him, the help of the County Librarian and the Librarian of the New Castle Public Library and to many members of their staffs.

PRINCIPAL AUTHORITIES

Original Materials

Somerset House, London. Original wills of many members of the Dixon family including those of George and Mary Dixon and their son Jeremiah.

Minute Books of the Quaker Society at Raby in Co. Durham. These contain information concerning Jeremiah Dixon and his father as well as copies of letters from the latter.

Printed Works

LONGSTAFF₃ GEORGE BLUNDELL. 1923. *The Langstaffs of Teesdale and Weardale*. Rev. ed., London. This work is the principal authoritative source on the Dixon family. It contains a detailed pedigree covering the period from 1650-1880, entitled "Dixon of Raby and Cockfield, Co. Durham." The author had access to many family papers and was able to record traditions handed down by descendants.

BAILEY, JOHN. 1810. *General view of the agriculture of the County of Durham*; 290-292. Gives particulars of the discoveries of George Dixon, Jeremiah's brilliant brother.

HOLLIS, H. P. 1934. Jeremiah Dixon and his brother. *Jour. Brit. Astron. Assn.* 44 : 294 –299.

Geographical Journal 47: 1-3, 1916:

'Gives a description and a photograph of the Theodolite used by Dixon in America.

Monthly Chronicle of North Country Lore and Legend,
245-246, June 1890.

Records some traditions regarding Jeremiah Dixon. Inaccurate in parts.

PENNEY, NORMAN. *My ancestors*. Privately printed. Contains information on the Dixon family.

SMITH, HENRY ECROYD. 1878. *Annals of Smith of Cant-ley, Balby, and Doncaster, County York*. Privately printed.

[1] Letter reported to the Society of Friends at Raby on June 6, 1745.