

"THE DIXONS

OF

COCKFIELD"

by

George W Dixon, JP

'The Dixons of Cockfield'.

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Lecture given by George W Dixon, JP
(Great, Great, Great, Great Grandson of
George Dixon - Jeremiah Dixon's elder brother)
to the Darlington Historical Society
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My motives for researching the family history were perhaps not the most positive. For many years I have read so many misconceptions and incorrect facts printed in newspapers or documents of supposed recognised integrity, yet they were so misguided and even careless to the point of stupidity and ignorance.

- e.g.
1. Numerous inaccuracies in "The Northern Echo" (Regional Daily Newspaper)
 2. The AA Ordnance Survey Leisure guide of Northumbria - edition of 1992.
Part of the entry for Cockfield reads:

"Cockfield is also the original Dixieland. A brilliant lad, Jeremiah Dixon - who, with kettle full of coal, discovered coal-gas - was eventually sent to America with a certain Mr Mason. Together they surveyed the boundary between Baltimore and Pennsylvania - the Mason/Dixon line from which some claim that Dixieland Jazz took its name".

This is incorrect. There were TWO brothers - George, who discovered coal gas and Jeremiah the younger brother, who was the surveyor with Charles Mason.
The survey was between Maryland and Pennsylvania.

3. H P Hollis, FRAS wrote in June 1934 in the Association Papers:
"Jeremiah Dixon (b. 1733) and his elder brother, George, were the sons of Ralph Dixon, a colliery owner of Henknowle near Cockfield in Durham."
Their father was George, their grandfather was Ralph.

I was determined therefore to set the records straight for my descendants and the continuance of the family history and their future.

I have traced our family history back to Tudor times - to the reign of Elizabeth I.
The mining of coal has been carried out in the Cockfield area since 1375. During the centuries since, our family has been in some way or other involved in that industry.
They have either mined it, surveyed it or been involved in the transportation of it. Some have even tried to exploit its by-products - including tar and gas.

Though the title of this document is "The Dixons of Cockfield", the story does not begin there. In fact, the earliest information shows that the family originated nearby on the Raby Estate at Old Raby. This was a small hamlet near the castle, long since pulled down, where they lived. They were local employees of the then Lord Barnard and worked either in the castle or on the surrounding estate in varying capacities.

RAPH (or RALPH) DIXON

My G (x8) Grandfather

Born: at Staindrop in ??? (not yet known)

Died: 1 January 1650 or 1651

~~GEORGE DIXON~~ *Nu*

~~My G (x7) Grandfather~~

Son of the above. Baptised 31 July 1636

Was a freeholder and voted.

He became a Quaker (Friend) at the beginning of the Quaker movement.

He was imprisoned on numerous occasions and fined for his religious beliefs.

In 1662 (Age 26) he was imprisoned at Durham for 8 months.

John W Steel in 1905 wrote in his "Early Friends in the North" -

"Let us now turn to a family who once so pervaded the Raby Meeting that it might almost be said to have been composed of the Dixons and their relatives. From a meeting at Henry Draper's at Headlam there was taken to prison George Dixon of Raby."

He had 4 ch - 2 daughters & 2 sons.

The sons were: (1) GEORGE DIXON b. 25.11.1671

(2) RALPH DIXON b. 6.4.1673

GEORGE DIXON

Elder son of the above. b. 25.11.1671

d. 26. 4.1752

Was employed as Steward of Raby Castle. NB He was the Great Uncle of Jeremiah (of the Mason-Dixon Line fame)

An extract from Darlington Reference Library -

"The Quaker Butler of Raby Castle"

George Dixon, Steward and Butler of Raby, finding the Lord of the Castle more devoted to the worship of Bacchus than was beneficial, when the occasion arose, declined civilly, yet firmly to send more wine to the dining hall. It is recorded the Master of Raby was occasionally wrath, but had failed previously to thank the faithful Steward on the following morning. On another occasion the Butler declined to let the Cook have some special wine for some sauce or pudding, and when asked by his Master if the Cook could not have some, replied with a very serious face, "Thou can't not afford it!", which so tickled the Baron that the interviews ended in a shout of laughter. In fact George kept the household purse as

well as the wine stores. Even in addressing the Baron, George used the plain phraseology of THEE and THOU. When a number of distinguished strangers arriving heard this statement, it met with such incredulity that Lord Barnard offered a bet of £200 on the point, which being promptly taken, George was soon summoned. The Steward presently arrived, but was for some time left purposely unregarded, until losing his patience and catching his Master's eye, he said in clear tones, "Pray what did'st thou want with me?" - to the amazed discomfiture of the sceptics. The money won was spent on an oil painting of the steward with the inscription - "An Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile" and a Latin quotation which may be rendered "Strong to restrain, immoderate desired, lightly returning public honours, a self reliant, refined and courteous man".

The original portrait is now in the possession of Mrs William Robson of Darlington. It used to hang on the staircase at Raby Castle opposite the entrance to the Baron's Hall. The First Duke of Cleveland who had married as his second wife a Miss Elizabeth Russell, gave her the choice of certain paintings; this portrait she bequeathed to one of her maids, who is said to have been a granddaughter of the Steward. The latter disposed of it to the late James Hutchinson Esq. of London and Cowley Manor, Cheltenham, where this photograph was taken. How it came into the hands of the late William Robson of Darlington, E B Mounsey does not know.

Another personal souvenir of this worthy, was in the collection of the late Edward Backhouse of Ashbourne, Sunderland. It is now in E B Mounsey's possession at Blackwell Hill, Darlington. It is the official stick or staff which he used on state occasions - a species of bamboo, dark brown in colour, standing 5ft 6ins high, with a head of ivory, and shod with copper.

RALPH DIXON

My G (x6) Grandfather

Younger son of the Quaker George Dixon (who was imprisoned)

b. 6. 4. 1673

Was a yeoman. Later lived at Henknowle, near Bishop Auckland. Voted as a freeholder.

He married Susanah Watson 1.6.1699. They had 10 children. The oldest son (2/10) was George Dixon, who later built Garden house, Cockfield, in 1751.

His second wife was Mrs Elizabeth Hunter of Newcastle, who was the third wife and widow of Thomas Hunter .

He was also her second husband.

GEORGE DIXON

My G (x5) Grandfather

b. 13. 10. 1701 d. 8. 11. 1755

married Mary Hunter of Newcastle (b. 11. 8. 1694) on 28. 2. 1724.

It is interesting to note that Mary Hunter was the younger daughter of Thomas Hunter and his first wife (Hannah Trewhitt). Thomas Hunter's third wife was Elizabeth Hunter, who became the step-mother of Mary Hunter, As a widow Elizabeth Hunter then married Ralph Dixon. She became the step-mother of George Dixon. He later married Mary Hunter. So Mary Hunter's stepmother (Elizabeth Hunter) also became her step-mother in law!! It takes a little time to reconsider this.

Thomas D Cope (University of Pennsylvania) and H W Robinson writing about Mason, Dixon and the Royal Society, describes Mary Hunter (who became the mother of George and Jeremiah Dixon) *"They undoubtedly inherited much from their mother, Mary Hunter, who was said to have been the cleverest woman that ever married into her husband's family"*.

George Dixon and Mary Hunter had 8 children. The oldest surviving son was George (4/8) followed by Jeremiah (5/8). These two sons were to make such an impact both nationally and internationally.

GEORGE DIXON

My G (x 4) Grandfather. Older brother of Jeremiah My G (x5) Uncle.

b. 18. 11. 1731 (or 1732) d. 29. 10. 1785 Buried at Raby.

Married his cousin Sarah Raylton on 13 Sept 1753 at Coniscliffe Parish Church

They had 8 children.

He became known in his life as a geologist, chemist, mathematician, engraver and china painter, as well as the undisputed pioneer of using coal gas to illuminate his property in 1760. Unfortunately he did not patent his discovery. That has been credited to William Murdoch, who, in 1792, employed it to light his own house and offices at Redruth, Cornwall. He was a successful coalmine owner, so was an able surveyor in his own right. He had studied mathematics at John Kipling's school in Barnard Castle with his younger brother Jeremiah.

As a young man he went to London. Being short of money he took to painting china at the celebrated works in Chelsea. In the first week he earned half-a-crown, but later began earning several guineas per week. In 1779 he returned to the north to establish coal-tar works. The tar was taken by road transport to Sunderland for use in the ship-building industry. In 1783 this business was abandoned because of the increasingly heavy transportation costs. He was a quiet, retiring man. In the "General View of the Agriculture of the County of Durham" in 1810, Bailey wrote:-

"I remember being much amused when a little boy by his (George Dixon's) filling an old tea-kettle half full of coals and setting it on the fire and luting a tobacco pipe with clay to the spout, and to this several others round the end and side of the room. After a certain time he put the flame of a candle to the end of the furthest pipe, and immediately a bright flame issued from it, where nothing was perceptible. He then made small holes with a pin through the clay that luted the pipe heads and shanks together, and applying the flame of the candle to each, there were as many flames as pipeheads. He had only made a discovery a little before, and this was probably the third or fourth exhibition of illuminating rooms with gas-light.

This mode of lighting rooms was for a long time a favourite project with him and he had thought of lighting his collieries with them, but was cured of it by the following experiment, at which I was present. Wanting to know the quantity of tar produced by a ton of coals, he erected a furnace with a large cast-metal boiler, and to this were fixed two large cast-metal pumps. (The iron pipes forming portions of the long barrels of the pumps used in mines are sometimes called by the miners - "pumps") One of them passed through water in order to condense the oil and tar. The end of this was filled by a wooden plug, with a small hole to let out the tar etc. towards the

conclusion of the experiment he placed the flame of a candle to this hole, and the inflammable gas immediately burned with a large bright flame. To extinguish this he struck at it with his hat, the flame was driven inwards, the gas in the inside of the apparatus took fire as quickly as gunpowder and exploded with a report like a cannon, driving out the wooden plug to, a great distance and exhibiting a cylindrical body of fire several yards in length. The heavy cast-metal pumps were removed from their places. From this time he considered his project of lighting collieries and rooms with gas lights as very dangerous, and I record this experiment with a view that it may probably be a useful hint to those who are at present engaged in similar projects of lighting manufactories and great towns with a material so subject to explosion."

In the "Gas Journal" 9 July 1924, there is a copy of George Dixon's drawing of his experiment to produce coal gas, showing the barrel and pipes.

Also Mr Waynman Dixon from Great Ayton wrote to "The Times" declaring the validity of George Dixon's original discovery before either Murdoch or the Frenchman Philippe Lebon. He claimed "honour to whom honour is due."

George Dixon had a concept in 1767 to build a canal to get the coal from his mines and others in the Gaunless valley to the Tees and then to export it from the coast to London. This project was known as the South Durham Canal Project. In Bailey's History of Durham in 1810, he wrote,

"The first attempt to make a canal was by the late Mr George Dixon, upwards of fifty years since, to carry coal from Cockfield Fell Colliery (which he rented from the Earl of Darlington) by a small canal, without a lock, to the top of Raby Bank, near Keeverstone, and then to convey them in wagons down an inclined plane to the foot of the bank, the loaded wagons to draw up the empty ones. From the foot of the bank the coals were to be conveyed in another canal without a lock to near the top of Grant Bank, where they were to be taken up by the carts from Yorkshire that came over Piercebridge and Winston. He cut a short piece of canal upon Cockfield Fell, and had a flat-bottomed boat upon it, to prove to the late Earl of Darlington the practicability of the scheme ; but his Lordship refusing to advance the money, the scheme was abandoned. The next attempt was projected by some spirited merchants and traders of Stockton and Darlington to make a canal from Stockton to Staindrop, with branches to the bridges of Yarm, Croft, Piercebridge and Winston. A sum of £861 was subscribed for defraying the expense of surveys, etc."

It is interesting to note that his grandson, John Dixon, was the surveyor of the Stockton & Darlington Railway Co. in 1825, which was the means of transporting coal as well as passengers from the Gaunless Valley. This developed from the standing engines which had operated at the Etherley and Brussleton inclines and then down to Shildon.

JEREMIAH DIXON

Famed for his part in the "Mason-Dixon Line".

Younger brother of George.

b. 27 August 1733 d. 22 January 1779 in his 46th year.

(Never married. Whenever he returned to Cockfield from his visits abroad, he always stayed with his brother George at the family home in Garden House. (This house is still used and externally has little changed.)

(Like George he was educated at Mr John Kipling's school at Barnard Castle, where he became interested in mathematics and astronomy. Much of his knowledge was self obtained, though he)

undoubtedly inherited much from his mother, Mary Hunter, who was said to have been the "cleverest woman that ever married into her husband's family"

Jeremiah had close friendships with William Emerson (1701 - 1782), the mathematician of Hurworth, Co Durham, and John Bird (1709 - 1776), the instrument maker, of Bishop Auckland. It is said that it was these two scholars who introduced Jeremiah to the authorities at the Royal Woolwich Academy. They were looking for people to accompany Rev Nevil Maskelyne (later the Astronomer Royal) to observe the Transit of Venus across the sun's path (on 6 June 1761) to Bencoolen on the Island of Sumatra.

During his interview in 1760 in Woolwich, for this expedition Jeremiah was asked by the examiners:

"Did you study mathematics at Oxford or Cambridge?"

"At neither place" was his reply.

"Then at what public school did you get your rudiments?"

"At no public school".

"Then at what particular seat of learning did you acquire thm?"

"In a pit cabin on Cockfield Fell".

This would be the cabin where his father's small colliery office was situated. Young George and young Jeremiah would work there in their father's employ. Their "education" would be very much "hands on" and very practical. Surveying skills in the mining industry of that day were always very critical to the success or failure of an owner's colliery.

Jeremiah was therefore appointed by the Royal Society to accompany Charles Mason as his assistant to carry out the necessary survey and calculations at Bencoolen in Sumatra during the transit of Venus across the sun's path. The calculations would enable them to determine the distance of the sun from the earth.

The survey team embarked on HMS Seahorse in the Autumn of 1760. At this time France was at war with Great Britain. After being attacked and damaged by a French Frigate in the English Channel, they had to return to Plymouth for repairs. This meant that they would not be able to arrive in Sumatra in time for the transit observations. It was decided that they could make observations at the Cape of Good Hope. They arrived there on 27 April 1761 and made very successful observations. They then sailed back to St. Helena in October 1761, where they joined up with Nevil Maskelyne who had experienced a frustrating observation of the transit there, because of overcast skies. They all returned to Great Britain in HMS Mercury under the command of Capt. Harrold, RN.

For many years there had been a dispute in the "colonies" of America, between Lord Baltimore's family and the Penn family concerning the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania. This had been an issue for nearly 100 years and was already most annoying to the authorities in England, as well as both families.

Early in the summer of 1763, Mason and Dixon were called up to London to confer with the Proprietors and offered the contract to undertake a survey to resolve these disputed claims. They prepared immediately for what was to become nearly 5 years' work and create the "line"

bearing their names, which has had such great significance in the history of the United States. Today in their own country their names are almost forgotten, but not so in the USA.

They landed in Philadelphia in November 1763 with a manual "Hints for Running the Lines" by Dr John Bevis and Daniel Harris, who was Mathematics Master at Christ's Hospital. The following instruments were also provided for them :-

A fine Sector (made by John Bird), 2 Transit Instruments (one by John Bird), 2 Reflecting telescopes - "fit to look at the posts in the line for ten or twelve miles". In addition there were other pieces of equipment provided by both the Baltimore and Penn families.

As well as the principal work both Mason and Dixon had enjoyed during their previous scientific collaboration they were keen and alert to any opportunities for further scientific work. On 28 June 1764 the Royal Society discussed a letter from Dixon from Philadelphia. He told of the opportunity to measure a degree of longitude along a parallel at Philadelphia. This request was again discussed on 24 October 1764 when the Council of the Royal Society was told by the President that " Mr Penn has made an offer to the Society of directing Messrs. Mason and Dixon to measure a degree of Longitude, upon a parallel of Latitude between Maryland and Pansilvania without any expense to the Society if the society would direct the method of doing it."

The offer was accepted, Mr Penn was thanked and a distinguished committee was named to organize the project - but nothing resulted! This supports the long-held theory that if you want to bury a good idea, give it to a committee!

The survey was to last 50 months and was completed in 1768. the "line" stretches 230.228 miles along the latitude 39deg 43min 26sec. Their last calculations were completed on Brown's Hill at Dunkard's Creek. It was here that I stood in September 1995 - the first of Jeremiah's descendants to return to that place since he had left. This was a very emotional and moving experience for me to complete the circle of re-union.

Jeremiah died on 22 January 1779 and was buried at the Friends burial ground in Staindrop, County Durham. This ground is now a private house and garden. As was the Quaker tradition then, there is no marked grave. It appears that he spent the latter years of his life at the home of his older brother George (my Gr x 4 Grandfather). This was always his base whenever he returned from his travels. It was here that he was visited by Capt. Cook, RN, the famous navigator, whom he had met on his return journey from the Cape in 1761. The theodolite he used in the survey of the Mason-Dixon line is in the Royal Geographical Society Museum in London. He remained unmarried, but there was a curious clause in his will, by which he left his "houses, garth, gardens, dye houses and premises in the manor of Bondgate in Bishop Auckland, in trust and for the benefit of Margaret Bland, the income of the same to go to the maintenance of the two daughters of the said Margaret".

JOHN DIXON

b. at Cockfield 25. 11. 1796 d. 10.10.1865

He was the grandson of George Dixon and Jeremiah Dixon's great nephew. He began work at his father's colliery. Soon after this his father sold the colliery to Jonathan Backhouse, a Quaker banker in Darlington. John then worked in the Backhouse Bank in Darlington and was then transferred by Backhouse to the proposed Stockton & Darlington Railway Company, first as a clerk and then as a

surveyor. In 1821 he actually surveyed the route that the new railway line was to take from Shildon to Darlington and on to Stockton. His survey was under the direction of the Chief Engineer of the Company, George Stephenson. Stephenson will always be remembered in history as the inspiration behind the first passenger railway route opened on 27 September 1825. However, if Stephenson is known as the first Civil Engineer, then John Dixon must claim to be the second. The bridges required for the railway line over the River Skerne and the River Tees were created by Benoni of Darlington (by the former) and by an unknown carpenter or millwright (by the latter).

John Dixon was remembered as a modest and unassuming man, but he deserves to be remembered for more than just being Stephenson's assistant. He experimented with the early locomotives. His curious and fertile mind helped forward the development of the early railway expansion. He was content to share his own engineering development successes with his colleagues and friends within the pioneering railway fraternity. In 1827 John was lured away by George Stephenson to work with him for the proposed Liverpool & Manchester Railway Company. During the survey there was much opposition. During their work they were all continually menaced with confrontation and personal violence from local rogues. Therefore they thought up a ruse by creating two surveying teams. One team was a false team, the other was led by John. Fortunately the local "objectors" followed the wrong team. During these months of surveying, the men stayed in poor lodgings. The landlady of their hostel was not good at varying the daily menu. The primary choice seems to have been eggs and bacon OR bacon and eggs. The choice was simple - take it or leave it!

In the book, written in 1875 by J S Jeans, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Stockton & Darlington Railway Company, the author wrote :

"After his death, which occurred at his residence, Belle Vue, Darlington on the 10th October 1865, in the 68th year of his age, the Directors of the S & D Railway company placed on their minutes a memorandum which bore that "Mr Dixon, as a pupil of the late George Stephenson, was employed in the laying out and formation of this line of railway as early as 1821. Subsequently entrusted by Mr Stephenson with the difficult work over Chat Moss, required in the construction of the Liverpool & Manchester Railway Company, he was afterwards engineer for several other lines of railway, and returned to this place about the year 1845, since which period he has occupied the position of Consulting Engineer. The Board now makes this brief record, sensible of the loss it has sustained in the death of an able and experienced officer, indefatigably devoted to the interests of the company, ever performing his duties with a gentlemanly bearing and sterling integrity, which won for him the respect and friendship not only of the directors, but also of a wide circle of coadjutors and friends."

JOHN DIXON

(associated with Cleopatra's Needle on the Thames Embankment in London).

b. 2. 1. 1835 d. 29. 1. 1891

This John was the nephew of John Dixon of the S & D Railway Company.

John has become known and remembered, with his brother Waynman Dixon, as the persons responsible for engineering the successful transportation, rescue and safe delivery of this Egyptian obelisk from Egypt to London. The obelisk had been offered as a gift in 1820, from the ruler of Egypt, Mehemet Ali, to George IV on his accession. It was not until 1878 that the gift finally

arrived and was placed in position on the embankment in London. Unfortunately, the pollution from the London traffic has created a deterioration of the monument. An article in "The Times" of 2 September 1996, focuses attention to the deterioration and suggests that it should be removed to the British Museum or to a park away from the traffic.

"DIXIE" LAND.

What is the true origin of "Dixie land" in the United States?

It was often sung by the late and great Al Jolson in "Swanee" - the line was

"- - - - on that Mason/Dixon line".

- (1) In the Oxford English Dictionary "South of the Mason/Dixon line" were the former slave states".
- (2) A slave owner from Leicestershire in England was called Dixie, who took his slaves to New York. He was then told that this was unlawful there. While the slaves were there they often talked about "Dixie land", the name of the Southern plantation to which they were eventually restored.
- (3) A "Dix" is french for ten. There was a small coin in New Orleans by this name.

President Abraham Lincoln ordered that the song "Dixie Land", so dear to the South, be sung at the reunion of the two sides after the surrender, making it one of the national anthems.

The Future - there are no "Dixons" of my family still living in Cockfield. I was the last one bearing the name, to leave the village.

I am proud of my heritage, yet humble and grateful for the traditions they passed down.