

THE MAN ON THE MAP

~ Jeremiah Dixon & His Lines ~

by Alan Readdie

Whenever I mention Jeremiah Dixon, I am rewarded with stares of incomprehension. "Who?" they murmur.

When I mention the Mason-Dixon line, they nod knowingly. But, when I press them further, they squirm with embarrassment. A line in a song? They all know about that! Or perhaps a railway line, a shipping company, the Canada/USA border, a World War I fortification?

Wrong, all of them. Except for the song!

Our American cousins know better, of course, for the Mason-Dixon line is part of the history of their United States. But in his native county, Jeremiah Dixon, 18th century son of a south-west Durham Quaker family, merits only a few paragraphs, often inaccurate, in local histories. The 'Dixon Garden', a stone trough erected by local schoolchildren in Cockfield in 1977 to mark the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II, commemorates the family, but when I saw it, the trough was empty save for a few cans and toffee wrappers. Jeremiah Dixon deserves better.

True, he is not a Cook or a Drake with innumerable islands, capes or straits named after him but his name does still survive on modern maps. There is a Mason-Dixon line. Let *Encyclopaedia Britannica* outline the essential facts:

"The boundary line (lat 39° 43' 26.3"N) between Maryland and Pennsylvania; popularly the line separating 'free' states and 'slave' states before the Civil War. The line derives its name from Charles Mason (1730-1787) and Jeremiah Dixon, two English astronomers, whose survey of it to a point about 244 miles west of the Delaware between 1763 and 1767 marked the close of the protracted boundary dispute (arising upon the grant of Pennsylvania to William Penn in 1681) between the Baltimores and Penns, proprietors respectively of Maryland and Pennsylvania. The dispute arose from the designation, in the grant to Penn, of the southern boundary of Pennsylvania mainly as the parallel marking the 'beginning of the 40th degree of Northerne Latitude', after the northern border of Maryland had been defined as a line 'which lieth under the 40th degree of North Latitude from the equinoctial'."

It is an interesting tale. We have two Englishmen braving extreme cold, hostile Indians and 'border ruffians', starting work in a 'plantation belonging to Mr. Alexander Bryan' and, with 39 men surveying first the north-south line between Maryland and the then county of Delaware. Then, in the spring of 1767, placing

'a Post Mark'd West' which began the line which now bears their names, moving slowly westwards, planting markers at mile intervals in a rough corridor about eight yards wide. It was meticulous work, with which modern surveys have found little fault. Finally, abandoning their task when Shawnee war parties were rumoured, they returned home, leaving their marker posts. Some survive to this day.

The two men cannot have known of their subsequent fame, of their permanent place on the map. Both were dead long before, in 1820, in a Congress debate, the phrase 'Mason and Dixon's line' was first used. They cannot have been aware of the word 'Dixie' as a synonym for the southern states, those south of their line. There are many explanations, possibly more likely ones, for 'Dixie' and its music 'Dixieland' but let us be romantic and patriotic and attribute the name to the link with the lad from Cockfield, Jeremiah Dixon.

The story of the line and its creation is well documented. Mason's diary was published in 1969 by the American Philosophical Society, having been rescued a century earlier at Halifax, Nova Scotia, where it had been 'flung amidst a pile of waste paper into a cellar of Government House'.

Dixon's other scientific work is also well recorded but his private life, intriguing and mysterious, is barely mentioned. The published sources cannot even agree on his date of birth --- either 28th July or 28th August 1733, in Bishop Auckland. His death, we are told, occurred on 22nd January 1779 --- despite the *Dictionary of National Biography*, in its section on Charles Mason, noting that Dixon 'died at Durham in 1777'.

This is not a man who merits inclusion in Parish Registers, or on modern aids to genealogy like the International Genealogical Index. I have been unable to locate a baptismal entry or a burial record and we are told that he died unwed so there is no marriage entry either. The trinity of baptism, marriage and burial, so beloved of family historians, simply does not exist in Jeremiah Dixon's case.

A mystery man, then, in his private life, but there are brief glimpses here and there. And some unpublished and unmentioned, perhaps unmentionable, aspects of that life.

The early 20th Century was a boom time for published family historians, often turgid and soporific affairs --- unless they concern ones own family, when they become irresistible and fascinating masterpieces, gratefully devoured by modern descendants!

One such work is a huge, 574 page tome entitled *The Langstaffs of Teesdale and Weardale*, by George Blundell Longstaff. He was related to the Dixons of Raby and Cockfield, devoted a chapter of his book to them, and included a detailed pedigree as well as a number of family tales and legends. This labour of love gives us the blueprint of Jeremiah Dixon's life.

The Dixon family was well-to-do, colliery-owning and Quaker, linked closely with the Raby and Staindrop Meeting House. Jeremiah's father was George Dixon (1701-1782); his mother, Mary Hunter (1690-1773), was the daughter of an old-established family in Medomsley in the north of County Durham. In 1745, we find father George confessing to his Quaker friends that he had been 'a great offender for many years in respect of Intemperance' and that he had fallen 'into that loathsome practice of Gitting too much Drink'.

George and Mary had several children, whose baptisms are recorded in the Raby Baptismal records, but there is no entry there for Jeremiah. He was educated at a Quaker school in Barnard Castle run by John Kipling, and there he showed talent in mathematics. He became friendly with a well-known Hurworth eccentric, William Emmerson (1701-1782) and the mathematician John Bird of Bishop Auckland (1709-1776), 'two men of kindred genius'.

It was the influence of Bird and Emmerson which caused the Royal Woolwich Academy to select Dixon, along with Charles Mason, to travel to Sumatra to observe the Transit of Venus in 1761. The expedition never reached Sumatra; storms and hostile warships saw to that but Venus was observed from the Cape of Good Hope instead.

Then came the great work in the British Colonies in North America, the work on 'the line'. After returning home to Cockfield in 1769, Dixon was soon away again, this time to Hammerfest in northern Norway, to observe another Transit of Venus. He seems to have lived in Cockfield in the 1770's. His work included a survey of Lanchester Common in 1773 and 'a fine piece of penmanship on vellum' entitled 'A Plan of the Park and Demesnes at Auckland Castle' which later hung --- maybe still does --- in the Castle, home then as now of the Bishop of Durham.

So much for his public life. What about the private man? He had his human failings, it would seem, and like his father, a taste for drink. The Raby Monthly Meeting Minutes, now in Durham County Record Office, show that in 1760 "whereas Jery Dixon, son of George and Mary Dixon of Cockfield, from an Education amongst us the people caled [sic] Quakers was deemed one of us but he for want of minding the principle of Truth and the advice of friends hath taken undue liberty as Drinking to Excess and keeping loose company ... we think it our duty to signify our disunity with him and cannot own him as a member of our Society untill he may by unfeigned repentance and Amendment of Life come to condemn his disorderly practice is what we desire for him'.

Sadly, we are given no further details of the 'loose company' and there is no further reference to him in the Raby Minutes. We are left to wonder whether he repented.

The records of the Bishop of Durham afford us important glimpses of Jeremiah Dixon. Copyhold records, relating to a form of land tenure which was abolished in 1926, give details of land transfers in many parts of County Durham, including the Manor of Bondgate in Bishop Auckland. There, in 1770, was a 'house called a Dyehouse situated on the river Gaundless'. It was occupied by Joseph Douglas, a dyer, but had been bought by Jeremiah Dixon and was being placed in trust 'to and for such use as Jeremiah Dixon shall ... appoint in and by his last will and Testament to be made by him'.

Apart from the copyhold dyehouse, Jeremiah owned a freehold house in Staindrop and both properties feature in his Will, among the Bishop's records at 5 The College, Durham. He made that Will on 27th December 1778, some eight years after he bought the dyehouse and he died, we are told, on 22nd January 1779.

There appears to be no surviving record of his burial. All that can now be said with certainty is that he was dead by 19th August 1779 for on that date his spinster sister Elizabeth proved his Will at the Consistory Court in Durham. Longstaff, and some other sources, tells us that Jeremiah was buried in the Friends Burial Ground at Staindrop, adjoining the Meeting House there. The Meeting House is now a private dwelling, the burial ground is its garden and there are a few old Quaker tombstones there. There is no stone to Jeremiah Dixon.

Fordyce, well known and respected historian of the County of Durham, writing in the 1850's, tells a different story. Dixon, he says, 'was buried at a little chapel belonging to the Society of Friends ... which stood at the village of Old Raby near Raby Park. The chapel was pulled down many years ago' and, it appears, a dog kennel was built upon the site! 'The grave of this man of genius has neither line nor stone to indicate where his bones are laid.'

Doubt, then, about the place of burial, a doubt which probably will never be resolved. No doubt, though, about his worldly assets and what happened to them after he died. Under his Will, he gave the freehold house at Staindrop to his brother Ralph and he gave the rest of his assets, except for the dyehouse in Bishop Auckland, to his sister Elizabeth.

It is the dyehouse, the one he had bought in 1770, which is particularly interesting. He gave it to his 'good friend' John Raylton, who was to 'permit ... Margaret Bland to have ... the rents and profits ... as the same shall become due'. He also desired that Margaret Bland 'to pay and apply such profits for and towards the maintenance, education and bringing up of her two daughters, Mary and Elizabeth'. He provided, too, that when the children reached the age of 21, the property was to go to them 'for good'.

Who was this Margaret Bland, with two daughters who benefitted under the Will of the surveyor, mathematician, 'gentleman' of Cockfield? Probably, she was the Margaret, daughter of James and Margaret Bland of Southside, who was baptised at nearby Hamsterley on 23rd September 1753. She would be in her mid-20's when Jeremiah Dixon died in 1779. Clearly, she was fertile for the Cockfield baptism register, in April 1780, records the baptism 'at 3 years old' of her daughter Elizabeth, a 'natural child' and on the same day, the baptism of another 'natural child', a son John. Interestingly, the Bishops Transcript, the copy of the parish register which was sent to the Bishop, puts it in different words. Elizabeth and John were the 'spurious' children of Margaret Bland. There is, however, no doubt about what was being implied --- 'natural' and 'spurious' are both euphemisms for illegitimate children. Clearly then, Elizabeth, one of the children who was to benefit under Jeremiah's Will, was born out of wedlock. For the other daughter, Mary, no baptism record seems to exist and we are left to wonder about the John who was baptised with Elizabeth but he features no more in our story.

Margaret Bland, the mother --- of Southside aged 52 --- was buried at Hamsterley on 9th September 1804. Her daughters remained and we can trace the history of the dyehouse they inherited, again from the copyhold records. In 1822 they sold it for £90 to one Thomas Henry Faber. By then, Mary Bland was the wife of a namesake, John Bland, a pitman of Southside. Her sister Elizabeth was the wife of a farmer, William Thompson of Startforth. It is not difficult to trace the marriages -- Mary to John Bland at Hamsterley in October 1794 and Elizabeth to William Thompson in 1803 at Barnard Castle. Both couples produced several children and, for all I know, there may well be descendants alive today.

But the mystery woman herself, Margaret Bland, remains a puzzle. She seems to have been of quite lowly status. We know she produced three illegitimate children and we know that the two daughters married men of similar station in their community.

Elizabeth was three years old when she was baptised in 1780, so she would have been born about 1777. Mary was probably older, for she married in 1794 but she too was probably a child of the mid-1770's. Why would Jeremiah Dixon, world traveller, sophisticated and relatively wealthy, bequeath property in Bishop Auckland to two such illegitimate girls?

Let George Blundell Longstaff, that early 20th century chronicler of the family, have the last word. He concludes his section on Jeremiah Dixon with the note that 'he died in 1779 --- in the prime of his life --- 46 --- unmarried. The thought occurs to one that perhaps Margaret Bland, the chief beneficiary of his Will, might have thrown some light upon his story'.

Yes, indeed. Perhaps she might.

NOTES:

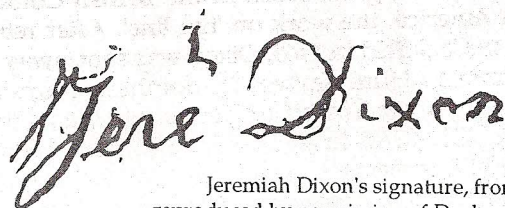
The Will of Jeremiah Dixon and the copyhold records relating to the dyehouse in Bishop Auckland are held by Durham University, Archives and Special Collections at 5 The College, Durham. The Raby Monthly Meeting Minutes are at Durham County Record Office, and its baptismal and burial records are on microfilm there. In addition to the work by Longstaff mentioned in the article, the Dixon family and its pedigree feature in *My Family*, by N. Penney (privately printed, Headley Brothers 1920, copy in Darlington Public Library). Articles on Jeremiah Dixon, of varying quality and accuracy are *Jeremiah Dixon 1733-1779, A Biographical Note* (Proceedings American Philosophical Society Volume 94, Number Three 1950), *Jeremiah Dixon and his Brother* by H.P. Hollis (Jour Br Astronomical Association Volume 44, 294-99 1934); *Quakers in Science & Industry*, A. Raistrick 1950. An article on Dixon's theodolite appears in *Geographical Journal* (Journal of Royal Geographical Society, XLVII Number One, January 1916) and there is *A Clock Sent Thither by the Royal Society* by Professor T.D. Cope, an authoritative article on the clock probably used in Pennsylvania, in *Proceedings American Philosophical Society* Volume 94, No. 3, 1950.

Jeremiah and his brother George are variously credited with the invention of gas lighting and George's home at Garden House, Cockfield, was reputedly the first house so lit - see *Journal of Friends Historical Society* Volume 51 page 57 (1965-67).

Mason's diary is in the U.S. National Archives and a transcription appears in *Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society* 76, 1969. I have not seen this or other American articles such as James Veetch, *Mason and Dixon's Line, A History of Charles Mason & Jeremiah Dixon* by T.D. Cope in *Nature* 1946 158:381 and *Some Contacts of Benjamin Franklin with Mason and Dixon and Their Work* by T.D. Cope in *Proceedings American Philosophical Society* 1951, 95:232-8.

Features on the former Friends Meeting House in Staindrop (where Jeremiah Dixon is possibly buried) and the clearance of gravestones there, appeared in the *Northern Echo* 5 October 1982 and the *Guardian* 9 October 1982.

I am grateful to N.D.F.H.S. member Miss Leila Dixon of Darlington, a distant relation of Jeremiah Dixon, for lending me her notes and papers, and to Professor J.C. Mann for a copy of his booklet *Staindrop Quaker Meeting House*'.



Jeremiah Dixon's signature, from his Will, is reproduced by permission of Durham University, Archives and Special Collections.

ADAM BUNTING
B.A., M.Ed.

*Research on your family in
County Durham & Northumberland*

Tyneside a Speciality

17 Moor Place
GOSFORTH
Newcastle upon Tyne NE3 4AL

Tel: 0191 285 7371
Fax: 0191 285 2625