

1 Introduction

The Thistlethwaites are an old family, centred in Dent Dale, in what is now Cumbria. Most have been Quakers. Their family home at Harborgill in Dent Dale has given its name to many other Thistlethwaite houses, including the one in Great Ayton on Station Road, originally called Gribdale Cottage.

Although several Thistlethwaites have lived in the village, by far the most significant was Jeremiah, remembered mainly for his grocer's shop on Station Road, opposite the Friends' Burial Ground. However, he had many other, less familiar business interests. These were carried on by his son, William Henry, who, against all odds, survived an infected appendix when he was only 32.

2 Jeremiah becomes a grocer and marries Rachel

Jeremiah Thistlethwaite was born at Ewegales Farm, less than a mile west of Harborgill in Dentdale, on 29 June 1826. His parents were William and Margaret Thistlethwaite. Although Margaret wore a Quaker bonnet and attended Friends' Meetings, she was not an actual Quaker and so William was disowned for his marriage. Thus his children were not born Quakers, although Jeremiah attended the Quaker Rawdon School near Leeds. He was then apprenticed to a grocer in Blackburn, and spent some time with a Dent tea dealer and also with John Horniman, the well-known tea merchant on the Isle of Wight.

His training completed, Jeremiah began his career as a grocer at Castleton, in what is now North Yorkshire, where he worked for Thomas Baker; several generations of the Baker family were grocers and drapers in around Castleton. There was another assistant at the shop, William Anderson, who offered Jeremiah lodgings in his house. At William's house Jeremiah met and fell for William's housekeeper, Rachel Peacock, who was born on 24 August 1824 at Woodale Farm, about eight miles from Castleton. They became engaged. Thomas Baker retired from the Castleton shop, and William Anderson took over, with Jeremiah staying on as his assistant.

Meanwhile, a distant cousin of Jeremiah's, Charles Webster, who had been working in David Baker's grocery business in Guisborough, married Rachel Peacock's sister Esther at the Guisborough Friends' Meeting House in September 1856. They moved to Halifax, where Joseph Webster was established as a woollen draper and tailor; Joseph's mother had been Eleanor Thistlethwaite before her marriage. Rachel went to stay with her sister at Halifax, where she was soon joined by Jeremiah Thistlethwaite. They were married on 2 October 1856, at the Halifax Register Office, obviously a non-Quaker wedding.

3 Jeremiah opens his grocery business in Ayton and raises a family

After the wedding, Jeremiah and Rachel returned to Castleton for a few months but then, in May 1857, left for Great Ayton where they opened a grocery business under "The Sign of the Eagle", with an adjoining dwelling "Eagle House". George Dixon had wanted a reliable grocer's near his school, opened in 1841, for the offspring of Friends who had married outside the Society. Jeremiah met the need, and opened his shop immediately opposite the school. The business flourished, with goods delivered by a flat-bed wagon drawn by "Paddy" to Bilsdale, Bransdale, Farndale, and Westerdale. In addition to groceries, there were drapery and clothing departments. Jeremiah's sister, Margaret, ran a bakery next door, with a tea room above Harbottle's undertakers. Later, Jeremiah's only son, William Henry, would take over both his father's and his aunt's businesses.

The census returns show that there were always servants lodging at Eagle House. In 1871 there were two young men, who worked as grocer's and draper's assistants and one female domestic servant, and in 1881 and 1891 there was one grocer's apprentice and one domestic servant, :

Just nine months after her wedding, and a few weeks before her thirty-third birthday, Rachel had her first child. Four others would follow, all born at Great Ayton at approximately two-yearly intervals.

Jeremiah died in 1910, aged 83; his wife Rachel had died in 1910, aged 78.

4 Jeremiah's other business interests

Jeremiah, far from being a mere grocer, was one of the leading entrepreneurs behind the expansion of the village in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

He bought Buck Bank Farm (located in what is now the Rosehill area of the village) and began a lifelong interest in breeding carthorses and cattle. The 1881 census records Jeremiah as owning a farm of 20 acres employing one labourer.

He financed significant housing developments in the growing area of California.

But perhaps his biggest undertaking was his partnership with George Dixon to run the Gribdale whinstone quarry. The full story of this ill-fated venture is told elsewhere. Sir Joseph Whitwell Pease had bought Ayton Banks Farm with the intention of extracting whinstone, the market for whinstone was growing after the arrival of the railway made it possible to sell to customers distant from Ayton. He joined with Jonathan Backhouse Hodgkin, who owned Slacks Wood, also with whinstone deposits, and the pair leased royalties to the Thistlethwaite/Dixon partnership. From the start, it seems that George Dixon was the dominant partner, Jeremiah's role being to provide the money for plant and equipment. Jeremiah left the running of the quarries to George; he would be preoccupied with his other business interests and, soon, the serious illness of his son.

5 Jeremiah's sister

Jeremiah's younger sister, Margaret Thistlethwaite, was born on 5 February 1830 at Ewegales Farm, like her brother. She kept a school at Cowgill in Dent and later at Askrigg then becoming governess with the Winn family. In March 1854 she was married at Bentham Church to William Cleminson, a plumber from Bentham. He was born February 1830 at Lancaster, son of William and Jane Cleminson. He died at Wakefield in 1873 at the comparatively young age of forty-three. In 1872, Margaret Cleminson and her six children moved to Great Ayton where they lived at Leayat House, built for her by her brother Jeremiah. She ran a bakery and confectionery business, with a tea room, next to her brother's shop. When she retired in 1899 to live in Redcar, her nephew William Henry Thistlethwaite took over the business.

Two of her children died in infancy at Great Ayton: Christiana Barbara Cleminson, aged nine years and Thomas Thistlethwaite Cleminson, aged three years.

One of her daughters, Margaret Thistlethwaite Cleminson, born in 1856 at Bentham, married Frederick Miles. He was an Inland Revenue Officer who lived in Great Ayton. The wedding was in 1883, at "Great Ayton Church", presumably a non-Quaker ceremony. The couple moved to Kirbymoorside about 1894, where they lived until Frederick died in 1907. They had no children. In spite of the non-Quaker wedding, Frederick was buried in the Friends' Burial Ground, Great Ayton. His widow continued to live in the village.

6 Jeremiah's first daughter, Elizabeth Ann

Elizabeth Ann Thistlethwaite was born in July 1857. She was educated at the Mount School in York and married John Naughton, from Westport in Ireland, at the Ayton Friends' Meeting House on 26 December 1878. After teaching at schools in Waterford, Jersey and the Midlands, he joined the staff of the Ayton Friends' School at Great Ayton. A few years after their marriage, John and Elizabeth Naughton moved to Halifax, where John began a private school at Carlton House. Afterwards, he became principal of Ellesmere School, Harrogate. Elizabeth Ann died in 1916 aged 58; her husband died in 1928, aged 81. They had no children. Both are buried in the Friends' Burial Ground in Ayton.

7 Jeremiah's second daughter, Mary Margaret

Mary Margaret Thistlethwaite was born on 28 January 1860. She attended the Mount School in York and married Samuel Newton, a surveyor from Todmorden, at the Ayton Friends' Meeting House on 21 January 1892, when she was nearly thirty-two years of age. Until then she had lived with her parents at Eagle House. The marriage was one of several which would bind the Thistlethwaite, Dixon and Newton families, all Quakers with Ayton connections. Samuel was the brother of Martha Newton, who had married George Dixon junior (Jeremiah's dubious business partner) in 1875. Samuel's father was Thomas Newton, was a builder and railway contractor at Todmorden. He had married Mary Hanson and they had three children: Walter born in 1844, Samuel born in 1849 and Martha born on 27 December 1850.

Samuel was eleven years older than his bride, and had probably been introduced to her by her younger brother William Henry. Both Samuel Newton and William Henry Thistlethwaite had worked in the office of William Phillips Thompson, patent agent of Liverpool, in the early 1880s. In 1885 he came to Great Ayton, living at White House with his brother-in-law, George Dixon junior, until his marriage. He spent three years surveying the estates of Sir Joseph Whitwell Pease at Hutton Hall, just outside Guisborough. Later Samuel and Mary moved to Finsbury Park in London. They had one daughter, Mary Hanson Thistlethwaite Newton, who was born in 1895 at Finsbury Park but, after Samuel's death in 1896, he was only 47, she moved to Great Ayton where she lived with her mother. Mary Margaret died in 1934, aged 74. Both she and Samuel Newton are buried in the Friends' Burial Ground in Ayton.

8 Jeremiah's third daughter, Lucy

Lucy Maria Thistlethwaite was born on 30 December 1861 and attended the Mount School in York. She remained unmarried and lived at Eagle House all her life. She died in 1946, aged 85.

9 Jeremiah's fourth daughter, Rose

Rose Hannah Thistlethwaite was the youngest of the family, and was born on 2 January 1866. Like her three older sisters, she went to the Mount School, York. Her marriage, in January 1903, must have caused a stir within the Thistlethwaite home. She was 37 years old, and had been living with her parents. Then just as everyone must have assumed she would remain unmarried, she found a husband. He was Charles Frank Dodsworth, was fourteen years younger than her, wasn't a Quaker, and was from the Thistlethwaite's rival grocery business, just around the corner on High Green. The wedding took place at St. Hilda's Church in Middlesbrough. One wonders if she divulged her father's secret recipe for baking powder to her husband.

She died in 1941, aged 75. They had three children: Christine Margaret Dodsworth, Lucy Joyce Hartas Dodsworth and Stephen Cornforth Dodsworth. Rose and her children are all buried in the Friends' Burial Ground in Ayton.

10 Jeremiah's only son, William Henry

William Henry Thistlethwaite was born on 24 December 1863 and attended the Marwood School in Ayton, followed by the Quaker School at Ackworth. He spent some time in Halifax with his brother-in-law, John Naughton, who ran a private school. There were then a few months in the office of William Phillips Thompson, a patent agent in Liverpool, where he would meet Samuel Newton, who would become another brother-in-law. William Henry learned about the grocery trade by spending a year with Amos Hinton, the Middlesbrough grocer, before entering his father's business around the end of 1884.

Aged twenty, he became infatuated with one of Ralph Dixon's daughters, Alice Elizabeth, or 'Allie' as he called her. She was a pretty young woman with long dark hair, beautiful eyes and the most exquisite taste in fine hats. This, and her other modern mannerisms, had been picked up in London where she had been governess to the son of Mrs Rachel Tuckett, a wealthy Quaker of Highgate. There she had met many of the famous men of the time: the Lord Mayor of London, Sir Robert Fowler, the railway millionaire Sir Joseph Pease, and the historian Thomas Hodgkin. Her delicate health had forced a return to Ayton, where her father was superintendent of the Quaker School. His diary implies that he proposed to Allie in November 1884, some time before discussing a marriage with his father, which he did on 9 February 1885. Both families would have welcomed the marriage; bride and groom were both Quakers and, despite William Henry's protestations that he was but a poor grocer, at this time his father must have been a man of considerable wealth. The couple married on 29 July 1886, at the Great Ayton Friends' Meeting House, then caught the 3:25pm train from Pinchinthorpe Station and left for their honeymoon in the Lake District.

Just four months before the wedding day, William Henry succeeded in renting Gribdale Cottage as his marital home and changed its name to Harborgill.

11 William Henry's children

William and Alice had only two children, perhaps in part due to Allie's delicate health or to William Henry's prolonged recuperation from his appendicitis?

Bernard Thistlethwaite was born on 18 September 1888, and educated at Leighton Park School, Reading. He became a chartered accountant working in London, and married Katharine Standing, daughter of Herbert Fox Standing of Great Ayton, on 12 October 1912 at the Ayton Meeting House. Susannah Fox was a sister of Elizabeth Fox (who had married Ralph Dixon, the second superintendent of the Ayton Friends' School) and had married Edwin Standing. This brought the Standing family into the Quaker community in Ayton. Bernard spent many years collecting information for his grand project of a Thistlethwaite genealogy.

Helen Thistlethwaite was born on 20 March 1890, and was educated at Polam Hall, Darlington. She spent the rest of her life at Harborgill, never married, and died in 1988.

12 Near to death

At the age of 32, in 1895, William Henry became extremely ill with, as it turned out, an infected appendix. Once again, the Quaker network came to the rescue in the form of a nephew of George Dixon senior, the first superintendent of the Ayton School and Allie's grandfather. Dr John Dixon had trained as a surgeon and was now working in London. He examined William Henry and referred him to Frederick Treves, who specialised in such matters and had just performed the country's first appendix operation a few months earlier. Elaborate precautions were made for his care on the journey; he was carried on his mattress to a waiting carriage, and taken to the station.

Straw had been laid beneath the carriage wheels to cushion the ride, and a special railway carriage had been set aside for him, being shunted from train to train during the long journey to London so he need not be moved again. Frederick Treves operated immediately, but found it too late, peritonitis had already set in. He stitched up the incision and all assumed William Henry would die. But with Allie's nursing and his own determination he recovered, although he was confined to a wheel chair for a considerable time. About five years later, Frederick Treves performed a successful appendix removal on Edward VII and was knighted.

13 William Henry's life returns to normal

Slowly, William Henry's health was restored, although he had to remain in a wheelchair for many weeks. He got back into the routine of running the grocery and drapery business at Eagle House. In 1900, he took over the baking and tea room business started by his aunt Margaret, Jeremiah's sister who had married William Cleminson and who lived at Leayat House in Ayton. William Henry installed Ada Thrush as manageress; she would later marry one of his mother's nieces and become Ada Peacock. When she married, she was replaced by a Miss Partridge.

After the his father's quarrel with George Dixon over the Gribdale whinstone quarry, the arbitration verdict of 1904 and the apparently unsuccessful attempt to float the business as a limited company, William Henry took over the management of the quarry. The whinstone business was sold to Joseph James Burton in 1912.

William Henry was an enthusiastic amateur photographer. Some of his many glass plate images were kept by the family, but many were thrown away before the value of such items was fully appreciated. He was also keen sportsman

14 A happy marriage?

While there is no doubt that William Henry worshipped Alice, she found difficulty in accepting life as a grocer's wife. In her brief time in London had given her a taste for the latest fashions and high society, whilst her husband found fulfilment in life in the small Yorkshire village. She refused to serve in the shop, which annoyed Jeremiah and Rachel, who must disapproved of her life of leisure. Alice spent her time gardening, breeding Persian cats, driving over the moors and to the sea, and holidaying with William Henry. Even although he was far from poor financially, William Henry always felt ashamed that he only had the status of a common grocer. His intellect and ability could have been employed in one of the professions, but his family background and Quaker religion ordained otherwise.

Alice did not need to trouble herself with housework, in 1891 she had two domestic servants and in 1901 one servant.

William Henry retired in 1923, when he sold the grocery business to the Cockerells. He enjoyed a long retirement, but in July 1944 he died from had a heart attack after sawing logs for the fire. Alice was heartbroken and she died seven months later. Both are buried in the Friends' Burial Ground in Great Ayton.

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