

## Thomas Richardson and the Friends' School

(Part of a chapter from "Great Ayton – A History of the Village by Dan O'Sullivan")

Two large schools opened in Ayton in the 1840s. These were the North of England Agricultural School (later called the Friends' School, and now Ayton School), and the British School. Both were founded under the inspiration of the same man, Thomas Richardson, who has already been mentioned above as having started an infant school in the village a decade earlier. He was born in 1771 in Darlington, although his mother was one of the Langbaugh Richardsons. His branch of the Richardson clan was quite a humble one and he started his career as a grocer's apprentice. However, he later went to London, became errand boy to a firm of bankers in Lombard Street, and worked his way up to be one of the wealthiest bankers in the City. He became a partner of Edward Pease and George Stephenson in the latter's locomotive works in Newcastle, and he was also one of the six original 'Middlesbrough owners' who founded the port of Middlesbrough as an alternative to Stockton and Yarm.

In 1841 Thomas Richardson gave £5,000 towards the total cost of £6,500 to buy the land at Ayton on which the Friends' School was to be built. The estate, of 74 acres, with a handsome Georgian house fronting the High Green, as well as a mill and several cottages, was sold to the Friends by Philip Hesleton, a Quaker landowner and linen manufacturer (see page 96), and himself a cousin of Thomas Richardson. Other local Quakers, especially members of the Pease and Backhouse families, including another cousin, John Pease, contributed the rest of the capital.



The school was intended to cater, not for the village children but for *the labouring classes of those who are in any way connected with our Society* from all over the North. By this date Quakers were just starting to give up their severe attitude towards those of their members who married non-Quakers (see page 133), and this school was particularly intended for the children of such mixed marriages, to give them a good, Quaker education. Pupils were to be trained, the boys in agriculture and the girls in domestic service, and the regime was to be fairly spartan:

*It is proposed that the food, clothing and accommodation altogether should be marked by the utmost frugality and simplicity consistent with health and comfort; the object is to induce habits of personal industry and to fit the young people of both sexes to be useful and happy in those circles in which an unerring Creator has placed them rather than to prompt them to aspire after more elevated walks of life.*

Today, of course, the school is going strong, but the educational objectives have changed slightly. Modern pupils do *aspire*, via G.C.E.s and university places. Unfortunately, the fees have changed as well. In 1841 they were £8 a year; today, many thousands of pounds!

When the estate had been acquired, a new, three-storey building was put up next to Philip Hesleton's house, and other alterations made. Thomas Richardson, now retired from banking and living at Ayton House, paid daily visits. He continued to make numerous gifts to the new school, and it has been estimated that his total contribution, between 1841 and his death in 1843, was over £11,000. A young teacher, who had taught in various Quaker schools including Bishop Auckland, who understood farming as well as teaching, and who had the additional qualification of being a teetotaler, was chosen as Superintendent. George Dixon took up his post, at £40 per annum, and by the end of 1841 the school held 16 boys and 16 girls.

The school's early history is set out in a readable, but rather rare, book, *the Jubilee History of Ayton School*,

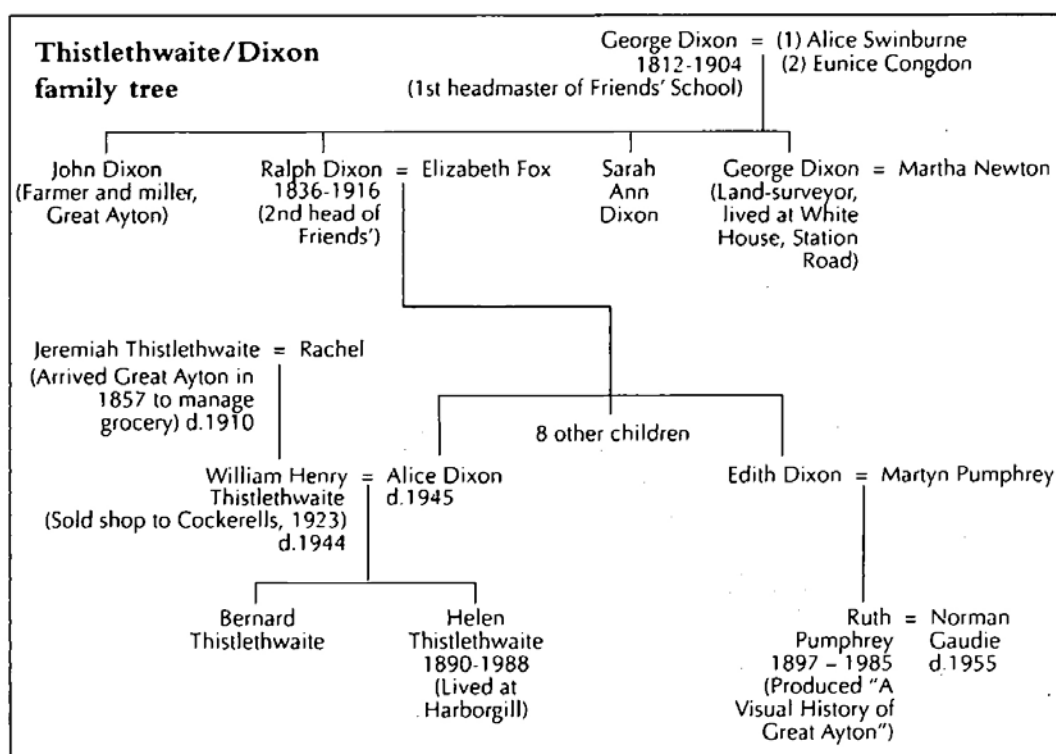
published in 1891 and mainly written by George Dixon himself. He describes a school educationally advanced for its day in which, for instance, stress was laid on teaching all the pupils to swim, and in which everyone seemed to be fairly happy in spite of the rather strict Quaker atmosphere. One rule was that no music, or even hymn singing, was allowed, and Thomas Richardson complained that the boys' and girls' playgrounds were too close, so that *the boys could see the girls romp*. Nothing was done about this, however. What the pupils had to wear seems to have been practical, but not particularly popular:

*The school furnished both boys and girls with clothing. The former having coats and vests made of grey woollen cloth, and trousers of strong cotton corduroy For out-door-work special clothing was required. A number of strong linen smocks or blouses, such as were worn by farm labourers in the South of England, were provided for each boy. They disliked them very much and hurried to take them off when they had done work ... For digging they wore wooden clogs, ironed round the edges, which saved their shoes. For the head, a strong Glengarry cap of a dark brown colour, obtained direct from Aberdeen .*

The scholars' diet must have been very nourishing - once one was used to it. It included

*an abundant supply of milk, wholesome brown bread and, every other day for dinner a suet pudding with a sweetened sauce which the housekeeper called melted butters but the children did not believe it had any butter in it, and it was so like the paste used by the men in putting up the placards against the walls it received the name of 'bill-sticker'.*

In its early days the school concentrated on agricultural work, but as time went on the amount of time the boys spent on the land during the week, and the girls on domestic duties, was steadily reduced, and in the 1880s both disappeared completely. It seems that what they did was never very profitable anyway. But normal lessons were not neglected, even at the beginning. The school operated on the monitorial system, started by a Quaker, Joseph Lancaster, in 1814, whereby older children helped teach the younger ones. This meant that at first George Dixon and his wife, Alice, could run the lessons by themselves. His speciality was natural history, and he used to take the children on long excursions to look for wild flowers, fungi and fossils. He was, in fact, a man of many parts. As well as running the school he set up a business from his home in John Street selling equipment for the natural history enthusiast and his designs for collecting boxes and tweezers are illustrated at the back of the *Jubilee History*. Immediately on his retirement in 1865, when he handed the school over to his son, Ralph, George Dixon decided (his wife having died) to sail to America and help educate the newly-emancipated slaves in the Southern states. He returned eighteen years later with an American wife, Eunice Congdon, whom he is said to have rescued from the clutches of the Klu Klux Klan. He died in 1904, aged 92, by which time his son, Ralph (head from 1865 to 1895), had also retired. Ralph died in 1916, aged 80.



## Footnotes

(see “**Great Ayton – A History of the Village by Dan O’Sullivan**”)

1 Ord,p.414

2 NYCRO QSB, 1694

3 Personal communication from Prof. John Postgate

4 M. Heavisides, *Rambles in Cleveland*, Stockton 1909, P. 73; Kettlewell, P. 1

5 Graves, P. 459

6 Graves, P. 456

7 C. E.Thornton, ‘The Scottowe Family ofAyton’, CTLHS no. 35, P. 13

8 Ord,p.414

9 Charity Commissioners’ Reports, 1819-37

10 Select Vestry Minutes, NYCRO PR/AYG 4/4

11 A field of 3 acres at Falsgrave was left to the poor of Great Ayton by Elizabeth Bulson, and half the rent of £9 a year was to go to *a schoolmaster ofAyton*. However, the Charity Commissioners could not trace the original will; Charity Commissioners’ Reports, 1819-1837

12 NYCRO PR/AYG 4/4

13 Parliamentary Papers 1819 IX

14 Parliamentary Papers 1833 XLIII

15 Dixon, pp. 19-22.The following section is also mainly from *The Jubilee History*

16 *The Cleveland Repertory and Stokesley Advertise*, Jan. 1843

17 Kettlewell, p.13

18 NYCRO ZDU (Marwood)