

CHRISTMAS IN WHARFEDALE 1891

[from Leeds Mercury 10th Dec 1892] BY HARWOOD BRIERLEY

ABDICATING all those usual Christmas pleasantries we allowed a Leeds railway train on Christmas Eve to whisk us off to Bolton Abbey Station. We got out there dressed in Bannockburn Tam-o'-Shanters, Inverness cloaks, and woollen scarfs; with bull's-eye lantern belted to the waist and the inevitable flask in case of necessity. It was a typical and wholesome Christmas Eve—so white, so pure, so penetratingly cold. We left dense, choking, abominable fogs behind; here, from zenith to horizon were millions of stars intermixed with planets. Our extremities tingled with the frost, which lay white upon farm, field, fence, and fell.

Our lanterns cast a ghostly ray upon the mouldering abbey. We passed Bolton Hall, which rose up massively grand and gloomy. Through one tremendous wood we passed, at the bottom of which ran the Wharfe, now hoarse, now sweet, now glancing white, now black as night.

At last we arrived at our destination. The dog Tibs, an old friend, flew out to greet us. We put out the lanterns, turned in and sat down to a broad, bounteous supper. At midnight we were in the garden [listening to] the murmur of the Wharfe over the stepping-stones that lead up to Drebley, down there by John Constantine's garth.

XMAS DAY - How glorious looked all the valley of the Wharfe this Xmas morning. From here, being situated above a considerable bend of the river, we could watch its course for miles. The sun came out. Carol-singer and church-goer were soon inspired by the beauteous morn. The former were on the hills at an early hour. We heard their primitive music stealing across the valley.

A typical 'Winter Morning Walk' and we arrived at Skyreholme Mill, with its immense water-wheel [39ftx6], visited in summer days from far and near. Not far away is Troller's Gill, a very narrow, winding, weird course between rocks of limestone, and traversed all the way by a wild rivulet born in the fells above, which winters ice cannot wholly bind. Creeping up the gorge over icy stone and boulders, we found many beautiful phenomena. Huge, transparent shells of ice, ice in the figure of sharks' jaws, formed upon spikelets of long grass that had fallen across the current; bridges of ice, beneath which the water issued like tongues of crystal; while, in testimony of the severity of last night's frost, under the clefts of the limestone rocks were fairy chambers screened by a stalactite fringe of icicles, some of them as thick as a blacksmith's arm, and one, according to my friend's measurement, five feet long.

We came back to our rabbit-pie, and by no means felt the want of the conventional Christmas pudding. It was quite novel, too, to be out of the way of the family gathering—living awhile with quiet, poetic, and all-sufficient nature, amid her unrivalled stores of mid-winter grandeur.

BOXING DAY

Next morning there was the drip-drip-drip of moisture resulting from a thawing wind. After the usual ham and eggs, we charged our pipes, and set off for the Strid a few miles away. Detached masses of ice were floating down the river, and breaking up into smaller pieces whenever they came into collision with rocks that lay in mid-stream.

But what a deafening roar the Strid made this winter's day! Its bubbling and boiling represents to the mind a mimic maelstrom, its swollen fury augmented by the masses of crashing ice that laden it.

After [our midday] meal we set off for Symon Seat. You should always mount up to Symon [Seat] from the south-west side, by a rugged romantic path, that skirts dense fir thickets. A lengthy toil, and the bridle-path ends at some peat diggings, or, as they are called here, turf-pits. Then in an oblique direction, across a veritable sea of dead heath, ling, and bents, rears the rocky pile of Symon Seat, higher than anything else around, like a black broken castle. On a clear day a panoramic view of Wharfedale may be had. On this occasion while we stood gazing at the circuitous, wintry wild valley, sudden darkness and rain enveloped us. We had to grope our way downwards across bog moor, peat-digging, along bridle-path, lanes still shot with ice, then over fence, along the green garth, and so past the granary and stables, and into home. But twenty-five minutes before reaching the fire-side, the opposite fells and moors had been blended into one long, far-spreading mass, whose edge stood against the sky like a thundercloud at midnight. We were guided by the little stars of yellow light that had appeared one by one in cottage windows across the valley.

27th Dec

Sunday morning broke with myriad beauties, for everything was frozen up hard again.

Having breakfasted, we were soon on our way to the service at Burnsall church. The bells here have been much praised by campanologists. This Sabbath morn we heard the wild, sweet melody tangled in their chimes, and were at once put into a happy frame of mind. The choir boys wear cassocks and immaculately white surplices, with collars all alike very deep and snowy. They also comb their hair.

** John Atkinson Bland born in 1825 was known as 'the Wordsworth of Wharfedale' and lived at Woodhouse Manor below Hartlington - and wrote regularly for the Skipton press.*

On that same day I remember, we went to see John Atkinson Bland*, the local spirit whose glory is in the Olympian dews and springs of that fair land. Yet a Yorkshireman he is, proud of home and shire-brethren. Past his doors runs the beautiful river, one tongue and instrument of music, that helps in summer-time to perfect that glorious choir of Nature which from fell and brake and field makes day dreamy and night delightful.

28th December

Monday has come again. The world is white with frost and snow. At eleven o'clock we left on our tramp of seven miles to Skipton, passing Barden Tower once more.

Turning south-westwards, we left the Vale of Wharfe, and, with lumbbersome bag and baggage, strode up the mountain-paths to the fells, in the teeth of wind and snow so blinding that cowls and veils ought to have been requisitioned. In Leeds there was no snow on this Monday; here the fells and moors were inches thick. We gained Eastby at last. Then Embsay, the Swedenborgian village, where the Rev. Mr. Jones is pastor, as well as the recognised lecturer on the newly opened Elbolton Cave, near Thorpe. We called, faint and storm-tossed, at Embsay's little inn for spice cake and cheese; and after two miles more of walking, we turned up at Skipton, close beside the church and castle.

Our unique Christmas was over, but its many unconventionalities will remain to memory dear until strength has failed, and ruddy cheeks have lost their colour.

Transcribed and edited from a 3,000 word article by David Turner for the Embsay-with-Eastby Historical Research Group (2012)