

SOUVENIR
OF THE
Mercer Memorial

OPENED AT
GREAT HARWOOD

SATURDAY, JUNE 20th, 1903,

CONTAINING A
SHORT SKETCH

OF THE
LIFE OF JOHN MERCER

TOGETHER WITH A
DESCRIPTION OF THE CLOCK TOWER.

——
“GAZETTE” PRINTING CO.,
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THE REASON WHY.

This little booklet is intended as a guide to all interested in the life of John Mercer. It has been compiled with the object of enabling the younger generation to know in some manner something of the fine genius whom Great Harwood is honouring. The photographs have been specially taken for this publication, and it is hoped that the souvenir will at any rate fulfil the purpose for which it is intended.

THE PUBLISHERS.

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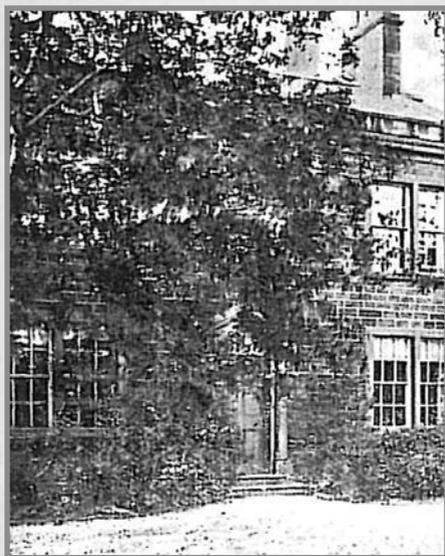


JOHN MERCER

Life of John Mercer



SHORT sketch of the life of John Mercer is almost a necessity to the present generation in order to familiarise everybody with the man and his work. It is 37 years since he died, and more than a hundred years since he was born, and as his life was not lived under the blaze of public illumination its principal features are unknown except to those who were closely associated with him. There will be many who will gather on the Town Hall Square, Great Harwood, who will ask - and it is a natural query - what manner of man was this whom we are honouring to-day. This little souvenir is an attempt to supply the answer. Technical details have been touched as lightly as possible, as from the limited space at our disposal only a survey of the general result,



OAKENSHAW HOUSE, CLAYTON-LE-MOORS.

together with a few incidents of his life can be dealt with.

John Mercer was born on February 21st, 1791, at Dean in the parish of Great Harwood. His ancestors, who were mostly agriculturalists, had resided in that locality for many generations. Their names are to be found in the first page of the register of the parish church of Great Harwood in the year 1556. At the time of the birth of John Mercer his father had a small spinning factory by the side of the Dean brook, the rivulet which now supplies the water reservoir of Harwood and Clayton-le-Moors. The improvements in machinery forced Mercer's parents to give the factory up and take to farming. This method of livelihood proved equally unfortunate in its effects and when John Mercer's father died in 1800 the farm life was abandoned. In reduced circumstances the widow was forced to obtain a living where she could, and at nine Mercer was set to work as a bobbin-winder. The story of his youth is an



THE MAYOR OF ACCRINGTON
(ALD. THOMAS BROUGHTON).

index to the later successes of his life. From the first stirrings of his mind he craved for knowledge. Education even of a rudimentary kind had to be picked up in the hours of leisure. One working-man took an interest in the industrious lad and taught him the three R's; another good friend was his mentor in mathematics. The same thirst for information fired his ambition to know something of dyeing. Purchasing some cheap packets of dyes he wormed the secret out in his own way, and so much evidence did he give of his natural bent in this direction that he was eventually apprenticed in 1809 to the Oakenhurst Print Works. His co-workers were not all anxious to help him forward, and unfortunately for Mercer his progress was retarded by the jealous machinations of a foreman : so much so that Mercer was compelled to go back to hand-loom weaving. Thrown back, on his own, resources his life for the next few years was a comparatively un-eventful one. He could not be idle, however,



DR. JAMES CRAN

and though the dyeing shop was closed to him he mastered, in the same dogged way, a few other things. In the meantime he had been equipping himself for further acquaintance in the art of dyeing, and soon after his marriage he entered the Oakenshaw works as an experimental dyeing chemist. From this point his career was a remarkable one. His life had been one long preparation under great difficulty for the opening that had now come to him. Nothing could pass through his hands until he had first satisfied himself that it could not be improved. His employers soon recognised the wonderful genius of their laboratory expert, and in a few years he became a partner in the business. His work was too important to keep the author undiscovered. Many of the leading chemists of the day sought him out, and paid deep attention to his methods. It was a pure-grained brain that they met, and the contact of the scholastic scientists with the rugged yet finely hewn self-taught chemist-philosopher, was productive of



COUNCILLOR T. NOBLE

gain to both. In 1841 Mercer became acquainted with Dr. Lyon Playfair, and a close and intimate freindship sprang up between them. It was not long after this that the "Whalley meetings" began. They were started at the suggestion of Dr. Playfair, and were held monthly. Mercer's originality of thought was keenly appreciated at these gatherings. When the British Association met at Manchester Mercer read a paper on "Catalysis," a study that he had first introduced at a "Whalley meet." A competence he soon amassed, but money, in itself, had never any great attractions as an aim in life. He was naturally prudent, and it was as sinful to Mercer's mind to waste money as it was distasteful to see any product of the laboratory go unused. The more the leading chemists of the day knew him the more they desired to honour him, but it was not without a certain doubt, born of a knowledge of the man they were dealing with, that a company of savants dining one evening at the house of



COUNCILLOR J.E. ALLSOPP

Professor Graham, raised the question - Would John Mercer like to become a fellow of the Royal Society? Dr. Playfair was deputed to write to him. In pressing the matter he wrote " I think you ought to accept the offer of your friends moving in this matter for you. It is a great tribute to a man who has acquired a knowledge of science without the aid of academies, and under very disadvantageous circumstances." The appeal was successful, and Mercer was elected an F.R.S. in 1852. He was also at this time an honorary member of the Manchester Philosophical Society. Success had as little effect on the true nature of the man as poverty. He was the same under all circumstances, and both he and his wife always preferred a quiet life of piety and usefulness. His greatest achievement was undoubtedly the discovery of mercerised cloth. Many inventors had repeatedly tried to give an appearance of silk to yarn, but in vain. John Mercer discovered the method, and though the full value



A.H. DUNKIN, Esq

of the invention has only been realized within recent years, Mercer himself had never had any doubt of the future that awaited it. This method of treating cloth was claimed as the invention of M. Lefeure, a certain French chemist, and this gentleman, through an oversight in the French specifications took out a patent for it. On discovering that he had been anticipated by Mercer, M. Lefeure wrote a courteous letter acknowledging his oversight, and withdrew all claim to originality. John Mercer also achieved distinction at the great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, when, at its close, so many exhibitors were desirous of making presents to the late Queen that Her Majesty was compelled to decline all such offers. She, however, made two exceptions, one of which was a present of a prepared pocket handkerchief from John Mercer. Mercerising cotton was discovered in a curious way. It was whilst engaged on another experiment that Mercer discovered the effect of caustic soda on cloth. It could not be



N. J. LEWIS, Esq.

followed up at the moment, but at some time later it was brought out, and the result was the valuable process which we know to-day. The discovery attracted a great deal of attention and a French company offered, for the purchase of the patents, the sum of forty thousand pounds. The offer was refused. Mercer soon became a wealthy man, and had he cared to make the most of his invention could have become enormously rich. His nature had been wrought out in too stern a school to be flattered by the mere possession of plenty of this world's goods. His singular insight marked him out as a most interesting personage in every walk of life. Brought up as a Wesleyan he still had an open mind, and no one sect could be said wholly to claim him. He had a wife of the same moral fibre, and life in the Mercer household was marked by deep devotion. When he became an employer, he realised that a moral duty devolved upon him. He pressed on his partners the desirability of building a church at Clayton-le-



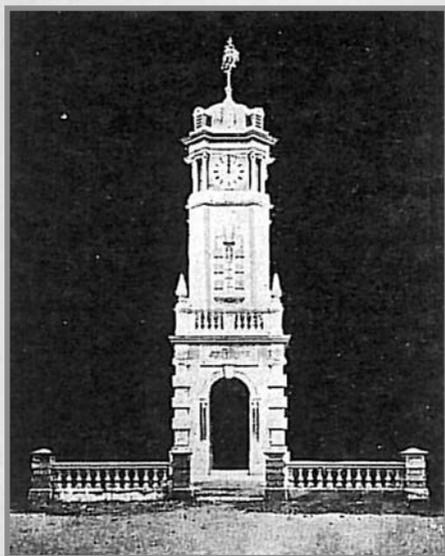
C. LEWIS, Esq.

Moors in connection with the Established Church of England. The present church of All Saints was the result. Points of church government brought about a secession from the Wesleyan body, but he continued to attend their services as well as those of the Established Church. It was a great blow to John Mercer when his wife died in 1859 at the ripe age of 74. He lived seven years longer surrounded by his children, all of whom were deeply attached to him. He died in 1866, in his 76th year, and was buried at St. Bartholomew's Church, Great Harwood. John Mercer always had a peculiar affection for his birth-place. His memory loved to recall the quiet homestead and the rural aspect of the neighbourhood of "Stoops Farm" and to him no spot had quite the same beauty as the village of Harwood, as it was one hundred years ago. Great Harwood at that time was not quite the busy town it is to-day, and over the cluster of houses and farmsteads of the locality there was a quiet that modern times cannot



JOSEPH POTTS

produce. But if the aspect of the town has changed the people are still capable of paying all honour to the memory of such a great son, and the splendid way in which the memorial has been taken up is deserving of all praise. The idea of erecting some suitable memorial of Mercer was first suggested by Dr. James Cran, the chairman of the District Council, at a meeting called to discuss the Coronation. It was spoken of very highly, but was deferred until after the Coronation. A committee was appointed consisting of Dr. Cran, Mr Thomas Noble, Mr. Arthur Birtwistle, Mr. John E. Allsopp and Mr. Dunkin. Mr. Dunkin was entrusted with the work of drawing up a design, and the magnificent structure to be unveiled on June 20th. is the result. It is creditable to everybody concerned, and no stranger can pass through Harwood in the future without learning that even in so remote a part of the country as Great Harwood a citizen has lived whom it has been a delight to honour.



MERCER MEMORIAL

Description of Clock Tower Great Harwood



HIS building has been erected on land forming the square in front of the Town Hall and Manchester and County Bank, and known as the Towngate.

A few years ago, in this place stood some old farm buildings. These were removed when part of the land was acquired by the Urban District Council for the building of offices, and since that time this plot has been left vacant.

The site was generously given by the District Council when it was decided to erect the Memorial in memory of Mr John Mercer.

The structure is built in the renaissance style on a foundation of concrete 4 feet thick and 22 feet 6 inches square, with steps on the four sides forming the approach to the Tower.

The tower is supported on four large piers forming the base, these being connected with semi-circular arches.

Over the four arches are tablets on which the following inscriptions are placed:-

1st Tablet facing Church Street;

Erected in Memory of John Merver J.P., F.R.S., F.C.S., a self taught Chemist and the Inventor of the world-wide process of "Mercerisation" as applied to Cotton and other Fabrics.

2nd Tablet to Blackburn Road:

Born at Dean in this Township 21st February, 1791. Died at Oaltenshaw House, Clayton-leMoors, 30th November 1866, and interred at St. Bartholomew's Church in this Township-5th December. 1866.

3rd Tablet to Curate Street:

The site was given by the Great Harwood Urban District Council and the following members acted as a Committee to carry out the erection.

Councillor J. E. Allsopp.

“ Arthur Birtwistle

“ Thomas Noble.

“ James Cran (Chairman).

A. H. Dunkin, Surveyor.

4th Tablet to Town Hall:

Unveiled by His Worship The Mayor of
Accrington (Alderman Thomas
Broughton),
20th June, 1903, and handed over to
Councillor James Cran. M.D., J.P.,
Chairman of the Urban District Council, on
behalf of the Town.

The base is 12 feet square and carried up to a height of 14 feet 4 inches and is surmounted with balustrading and moulded finials at each corner. The base is covered at this height with a stone panelled floor in one stone.

The shaft of the Tower which commences at this level, is square in form with large wide buttresses projecting at an equal angle from each corner giving a somewhat octagonal appearance. In each face of the shaft a window is inserted.

At this level is another stone floor in one stone forming a rigid bond to every part of the structure also forming Clock Chamber floor. The height of the shaft being 13 feet 8 inches.

Above this is the Clock Face, commencing with a carved string course on which stands

moulded bases supporting red Scotch Granite Pillars surmounted with carved capitals supporting the moulded frieze, cornice and pediment above, these pillars form a continuation of the angle buttresses in connection with the shaft.

The stone framing of the Clock Face is moulded and carved.

The whole is covered with a burnished copper dome - 4 louvres are thrown out at the angles on each buttress to allow the sound of the bell to escape.

Crowning the dome is a finial or weather vane. The feature of this is the Mortar and Pestal - symbolical of John Mercer's work. There is also the Thistle, Rose and Shamrock.

The total height from the base to the top of the finial is 52 feet.

To protect the Tower a balistraded boundary wall has been erected around the base of the Tower.

The stone has been obtained from the best

beds in the Howely Park (Morley) Quarries.

The design which has been prepared by Mr. A. H. Dunkin, Surveyor to the Council, has been carried out in a most substantial and creditable manner by the well-known firm of Messrs. Edward Lewis and Sons, Shorrock Delph, Blackburn, who hold a very high reputation for this class of work, under the direct supervision of Mr. N. J. Lewis.



The Clock



THE Clock has been made by the re-nowned firm of Wm. Potts and Sons of Leeds, makers of the most important Clocks in the country, amongst which may be mentioned, Town Hall Preston, Town Hall Bolton, Wakefield, Manchester, Burnley and Lincoln Cathedral.

It is constructed from the designs of Lord Grimthorpe, the greatest authority on Clocks, with all the latest improvements.

The hours are struck upon a bell which weighs 2 cwts.

It has four external dials each 3 feet 6 inches in diameter, which will be lighted automatically by the Clock works.