

# Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society.

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## Dr. Johnson's Ashbourne Friends.

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(A paper read at the Summer Meeting of the Johnson Club, at the Green Man Hotel, Ashbourne, 17th June, 1939).

ONE might imagine that, living as I have done for many years, in a place so closely associated with Johnson, and residing most of the time in the actual house at which he visited and stayed so many times, I should have been able to collect a fair amount of topical information, or at any rate that there would have been a number of traditions handed down to our times. But, as a matter of fact, there was little to learn about him and that only from a few persons specially interested. The chief recollections about him were that he stayed at the Mansion, that he wrote his dictionary in the summer-house in the garden and that his bed-room was the tiny room in a wing of the house which I have since learnt was not built until after his time.

Most of the friends Johnson had in Ashbourne (but not quite all) were the friends of Dr. Taylor,<sup>1</sup> Johnson's life-long friend and the owner of the house to which Johnson came so often to stay.

<sup>1</sup> A portrait of Dr. Taylor appeared in *D.A.J.*, n.s., vol. VI, 1932.

Dr. Taylor belonged to an old Derbyshire family and many of his ancestors lived in Ashbourne and the immediate neighbourhood, and were benefactors to its charities. His grandfather, Benjamin Taylor, was an Ashbourne attorney who built the Mansion about the year 1680 ; and his father Thomas followed the same profession and was associated with the social and professional life of Ashbourne all his days. He died in 1731, leaving the chief part of his estate, and his house to his son, John, who at first followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather and studied law, becoming also a practising attorney. But somewhere between the years 1736 and 1740 he decided to take holy orders and, immediately after he was ordained, obtained the Rectory of Market Bosworth. He acquired this by purchase, as was clearly ascertained by the bank manager, who, out of curiosity aroused by the large sums drawn from Dr. Taylor's account, marked some of the coins, which he found were in due course returned to the bank by the patron of the living.

This was the first of his preferments and from thence onwards he was always seeking fresh ones ; it became indeed the ruling passion of his life. Johnson wrote to Mrs. Thrale that livings and preferments were running in his head as if he were in want with 20 children. He always hoped for a Bishoprick or at any rate a Deanery.<sup>1</sup>

I have a letter of Taylor's written from Westminster Abbey illustrating this passion of his. It says,

Sir,

After the assurances I have so often received of your friendship and after the Diligence which I have upon

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the living of Market Bosworth, Dr. Taylor acquired a prebend of Westminster in 1746, the preachingship of the chapel in the Broadway, Westminster, in 1740, the rectory of Lawford in Essex in 1751, the perpetual curacy of St. Botolph's, Aldersgate in 1769 (resigning this in 1776), and the rectory of St. Margaret's, Westminster in 1784. He was also chaplain to the Duke of Devonshire.

all occasions exerted to deserve it ; it was a very great mortification to me this day to receive your Denial of so *small* a favour, I may be surely allowed to call it a small favour, since *all* I request is only a guinea for one and twenty shillings, and I should be happy to obtain less. My Lord Bute might obtain for some *friend* of his Lordships my living of Bosworth, which some time or other must be of great consequence to you. I am much afraid that some Person must have done me ill offices with you ; if there is anything which you take ill of me, by giving me an opportunity to clear myself, you will greatly oblige Sir.

Your most obedient and most humble servant,  
John Taylor.

Westminster Abbey.

Dec. the 1st 1760.

The outside of the letter is endorsed in another handwriting,

Dr. Taylor 1 Dec. 1760.

desires my Assistance in changing his preferments.

Though he held so many preferments it is not known that he resided for any length of time in any parish to which he had been appointed and no sermons are known which he wrote. He is not infrequently referred to as Vicar of Ashbourne, but he never held that living, and does not appear to have preached very often, if at all, in Ashbourne Church.

A survey of some of the incidents in Taylor's life will help to give us an idea of the kind of man he was. He was known, even throughout the county, as the ' King of Ashbourne.' I suppose that his social position and wealth, his force of character and his pomposity would to some extent explain this title, but his benevolence and generosity to the poor contributed to it. In the *Derby Mercury* of March 14th 1777, we read that " Monday

and Tuesday last were distributed, by order of the Reverend Dr. Taylor, one hundred guineas to the poor necessitous housekeepers in Ashbourne and that neighbourhood—a benefaction truly noble and worthy of the heart of the generous donor.”

Though wealthy and generous he was indifferent about the payment of his debts and gave his creditors a great deal of trouble in that respect. This was probably due to that indolence of nature which led Johnson to observe of him that “if you put a pebble upon his chimney piece you would find it there in the same place a year afterwards.” He loved display and pomp. It was this that induced him to enlarge and adorn the already handsome and commodious house that his father had bequeathed to him, by calling in Robert Adam, who was at that time employed by Lord Scarsdale to rebuild Kedleston Hall and was able to undertake Taylor’s commission at the same time.

The work which Adam carried out on Taylor’s house converted it into a miniature mansion—one of the best of the smaller works of the Adam brothers in the country. Taylor furnished the house well too, and had a superb collection of silver, of china and of pictures including the portrait of Johnson painted specially for Taylor by Sir J. Reynolds shortly before Johnson’s death. The portrait was disposed of in a sale of the effects of Dr. Taylor’s heir, Wm. Webster, somewhere between 1840 and 1850, and after being lost sight of for a while ultimately came into the possession of Mr. Edward Newton, the famous American collector.

Another instance of Taylor’s love of display is seen in the way he made use of the velvet trappings used at the Coronation of George III, to a portion of which he was entitled as a prebendary of Westminster, to adorn his family pew in Ashbourne church. The pew itself was an indication of display. He bought it from Lord

Scarsdale in 1766 and it took the place of a smaller pew in an inconspicuous part of the gallery. Its transference to Dr. Taylor was effected in a long and verbose deed engrossed on parchment, signed by Dr. Taylor and Lord Scarsdale's representative and witnessed (a point of great interest) by Richard Peters, Dr. Taylor's butler.<sup>1</sup>

The new pew occupied a much more prominent position than Dr. Taylor's original one. It was under the central tower and just beneath the pulpit, in view of the whole congregation. Dr. Johnson would often use it, as did Boswell in 1777. It was large and roomy, with shelves for bibles and books of devotion, supported by gilt brackets and lined with the red velvet from Westminster Abbey.

One can understand how Boswell, reclining in the pew in the autumn of 1777, felt "great satisfaction in considering that he was supported in his fondness for solemn worship by the general concurrence and munificence of mankind."

Taylor, as is well known, spent a good deal of his time breeding cattle, horses, deer, and bull dogs, and on experiments with various kinds of grain, but very little time, I'm afraid, in the performance of his clerical duties. He did however devote a good deal of his time and energies to public duties of other kinds. He was a member of the Old Trust founded by charter of Elizabeth in 1585, and was a regular attendant at its meetings and a member who seemed to afford very practical assistance in the business of the Trust, being helped in this respect no doubt by his earlier legal training. He was instrumental in making an exchange of lands belonging to the Ashbourne Grammar School for lands in Dublin, which to this day bring in an income to the Trust of £210 a year.

<sup>1</sup> For a verbatim reproduction of this deed, with photographs, see *D.A.J.*, n.s., vol. II, p. 7.

He was a J.P. for both Leicestershire and Derbyshire, and there again he took up his duties seriously and acted both with mercy and justice.

In the *Manchester Mercury* of Feb. 10th 1767 is an article relating to his magisterial duties showing a very pleasant side of his character. In his capacity as a Derbyshire magistrate, he had acted so promptly and efficiently in suppressing a series of riots, that he received an address of thanks and was offered the gift of a silver cup and cover by the Cheesemongers of London, whose property he was instrumental in saving. The address stated that they wished to make this presentation "in testimony of gratitude for the services of a worthy magistrate, the Rev. Dr. Taylor of Ashbourne, in suppressing the lawless rioters by whom their property and commerce in the County of Derby were greatly endangered Anno Dom. 1766."

Taylor's reply to the Company of Cheesemongers shows him to have been at heart a man of high principles as well as of merciful leanings. He wrote thus:

Ashbourne, Dec. 26, 1766.

Gentlemen,

This morning I received your letter with an elegant cup. I do sincerely assure you, that it was not in hope of any Public Token of Approbation that I have been ready to exert against the late Riots, the Authority which I have the Honour to be entrusted with by his own Majesty. A Magistrate and a Clergyman is rewarded by his own Conscience for all endeavours to discharge his Duty.

I think all acceptance of Presents in a Magistrate of so dangerous example, though I am highly gratified by the honourable Notice which you have taken of my Conduct, I must refuse so valuable a Testimony, unless you will appoint some Agent to receive the Price, to be distributed to Charity. I will not distribute it

myself, because I will not dispose of your money. This is my deliberate and settled purpose, and I shall not think myself properly treated, if any Attempts are made to dissuade me from it.

The Poor of this Parish have always shown the greatest attention to my Admonitions, and all the Time of the late Commotions, declared, in very resolute Terms, their readiness to support me against all Persons that should attempt to disturb the Peace of this Neighbourhood ; I am extremely desirous to show them that nothing is lost by doing Right, and therefore should be very glad if this Money might be given amongst them. Another Reward may be added, by which I shall be yet more obliged. If the worthy Committee will join their endeavours with mine to obtain some Mitigation of severe Sentences, and some Commutation of Capital Punishments, they will supply me with incitements to do my Duty on a like Occasion with yet greater Alacrity. I hope to receive some Promise, that, as I have enabled them to obtain Justice, they will unite with me to solicit Mercy.

I am, Gentlemen etc.

John Taylor.

There is a story concerning his magisterial duties which presents him in a lighter mood.

A well-known drunkard was brought by the constable to his house, to be dealt with summarily by him as magistrate. He sent word that the man should be brought to him in the room which overlooked the lawn and lake. After a severe reprimand he ordered the man to run away through the lake, he himself opening the door which led to it. As soon as he saw him well in the water he violently rang the bell for the constable, who was waiting in the servants' hall, and on his appearance exclaimed vigorously " There! you see where that fellow is, if you don't catch him he'll escape." The constable,

nothing loath to demonstrate his official zeal under the very eye of his superior, at once plunged into the stream, which, as Johnson tells us, had a tendency to silt up and become boggy. Spluttering and splashing, wading and wallowing, constable and prisoner together laboriously ploughed their way to the other side and emerged, the prisoner with the constable at his heels. The latter undaunted by his immersion, though heavily encumbered by the dripping uniform still pursued his quarry across the paddock and up the hillside beyond, while the Doctor shook his sides with laughter at the ludicrous spectacle.

Some idea of Taylor's personality may be obtained from the observations of his contemporaries.

Johnson summed him up as "a very sensible acute man with a strong mind." You will remember Taylor's opinion of Johnson: "He is a man of a very clear head and great power of words, and a very gay imagination, but there is no disputing with him. He will not hear you, and having a louder voice than you, must roar you down."

It is interesting to learn what the Rev. Mark Noble, who was educated at Ashbourne Grammar School and who knew Taylor very well, thought of him, because his opinion has never, so far as I know, been made known to the world. It is contained in a little MS. diary written by Mrs. Sarah Chattock, the sister of Mark Noble, and describes a tour she made through the counties of Derby and Stafford in 1797, with extensive notes and additions by Mark Noble himself in his own handwriting. One of Noble's notes says:

"Dr. Taylor was a man of good paternal fortune bred an attorney, purchased the rich living of Market Bosworth in Leicestershire, went into holy orders and obtained the valuable living of St. Margaret next Westminster Abbey and a stall in the latter church; he sighed for lawn sleeves; made many valuable presents



to his Majesty of the finest Horses, Bulls, Cows, Sheep, Greyhounds and Hounds of his own rearing. His friend Dr. Johnson wrote sermons for him but he never preached more than four or five times a year; never was a greater contrast than between the Christian philosopher and the divine, each indeed was proud: one of his mind, the other of his purse. He was extremely fond of all animals; his birds were incredibly numerous. He had two wives; the last is still living, but left him many years since without assigning any excuse; she resides in London. He never had any issue. He was an active magistrate, and a friend to the Poor, but capricious, proud, ambitious, luxurious."

One more opinion of Taylor which is not commonly known. Mrs. Nicholas, a Derbyshire lady, who was connected by both birth and marriage with three Derbyshire county families and, belonging to the county set in which Taylor moved, would know him very well, wrote that " Dr. Taylor was never famous for veracity or any other good quality." You will find this statement in one of a series of her letters discovered a few years ago and described and annotated by Mr. Aleyne Reade in the *London Mercury* of January, 1930. This is to me a new reading of Taylor's character and one which cannot be altogether correct.

There has been a good deal of speculation as to the reason for the friendship between Johnson and Taylor, and no one has been able to offer a completely satisfactory explanation.

It seems unlikely that Johnson can have thought that Taylor would leave his fortune to him, as has been surmised. Johnson was older than Taylor; nor can one believe from what one knows of Johnson that he would be likely to cultivate a friendship with anyone with such an object in view. Johnson did not at any rate make

any attempt to keep on good terms with Taylor; indeed he criticised, often severely, Taylor's conduct whenever he saw any occasion to do so. Their friendship was certainly an intimate one, beginning, we believe, in boyhood when they were schoolfellows at Lichfield Grammar School and all through life they saw a good deal of each other in one way and another. The first recorded visit of Johnson to Ashbourne is in 1767. In later years he brought his friends to Dr. Taylor's, as for instance Mrs. Thrale and her daughter Queeney in 1774, and the great Boswell himself in 1776 and 1777. There is the important visit in the year of Johnson's death when he chose Ashbourne and Dr. Taylor's house as the best place in which he might hope to find some relief from the symptoms of the mortal illness with which he was then afflicted and which was to end his life so soon after his return to London.

May we ask if it was possible that Dr. Johnson had kept up his friendship with Taylor because of the attractions of the town itself or of the people he met there? Ashbourne was a quaint little country town, very much shut off from the rest of the world, with an annual season of its own and a theatre in which there were a few weeks of performances during the height of the season. It had quite a large proportion of better-class houses and residents, and the country around was then, and until recent years, thickly bestrewn with fine country houses and mansions inhabited by county families of good standing and ancient lineage, who came in from their often remote country houses to enjoy the Ashbourne season which was in the early spring. Dr. Taylor held a good position in the county, not only politically but socially, and doubtless Johnson would meet many of these people in his visits to Derbyshire: we do indeed hear the names of many of them in "The Life", in Boswell's Journals, and in the diaries of Mrs. Thrale and Johnson himself.

Taylor entertained largely and on a lavish scale. In the *Derby Mercury*, from an issue of which I have previously quoted, there was on Jan. 15. 1773, a reference to one of his entertainments: "We hear from Ashborne that the Rev. Dr. Taylor lately gave a very elegant entertainment to upwards of 80 of the principal inhabitants of the Place, which was conducted with the utmost decorum, and gave great satisfaction to all the Partakers of a plentiful Table."

Though Dr. Taylor included among his friends and guests most of the aristocratic people of the county, he had also, as you will hear later, a number of local friends who did not belong, and probably would not have cared to belong, to "the county." And according to Mrs. Thrale even the county did not appeal to her. In her diary written during the ten days visit to Ashbourne in 1774, when on her way into Wales with Johnson, she comments first on "the elegance and splendour of Dr. Taylor's surroundings at Ashbourne; his fine pictures which he does not understand the beauties of, a glorious harpsichord which he sends for a young man out of the town to play upon, a waterfall murmuring at the foot of his garden, deer in his paddock, pheasants in his menagerie, the finest coach horses in the county, the largest horned cattle I believe in England, his table liberally spread, his wines all excellent in their kinds;" and then she passes on to his companions; "they indeed," she says, "are as they must be—such as the county affords. We had a specimen of them today—very poor creatures both women and men."

Mark Noble in the MS. diary, from which I have already quoted says of Ashbourne that "it abounds in gentry. When I was there it had not less than 5 justices of the Peace, Sir Brooke Boothby, Dr. Taylor, and three gentlemen of the surnames of Beresford, Haynes and Dean . . . Card-playing and squabbles about precedency occupied most of the time of the great and little gentry."

Among the special friends of Taylor, whom Johnson met, there was first of all, the Rev. Wm. Langley the Headmaster of the Grammar School at Ashbourne. True, he was not a particular friend of Taylor's, for they did not get on well together and had frequent quarrels; but Johnson was rather friendly with Langley and used to go over to the Grammar School opposite and sit with him in his garden. Langley must have been an awkward person to deal with, as we know from his behaviour to the Governors of the School. He was fond of his own way and was of a domineering nature, which may have been the reason why he and Taylor could not agree.

The minute book of the Governors of the Ashbourne Grammar School tells us a good deal of the character and personality of Langley. Dr. Powell has summarised the minutes and given an interesting and amusing account.<sup>1</sup>

Langley was appointed Headmaster on 31st March 1752. He was a Master of Arts and took his degree at Oxford. On 22 Feb. 1754 Mr. W. Wilson the Undermaster formally complained to the Governors of "Mr. Wm. Langley the Head Schoolmaster's various and frequent interruptions of his privileges as Under Master and particularly that of Tuesday last of Breaking a Table placed in the School for the improvement of the Scholars in Writing and accounts . . . and of forcibly throwing it into the School passage belonging to the Under Master, and likewise for breaking down the fence between their respective gardens, and doing several other Trespasses of the like Nature;" for these misdemeanours Mr. Langley's salary was reduced by £10 a year, which sum was ordered to be paid to the Under Master "in augmentation of his wages as being careful and diligent . . . and for the Damages and Depredations committed by Mr. Langley." The trouble with the Under Master continued

<sup>1</sup> Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (G. B. Hill) revised and enlarged by L. F. Powell, vol. III, p. 494.

and on 25 Nov. of the same year the Governors ordered that Mr. Langley "be deprived and removed out of his place as Schoolmaster" and that no more wages should be paid to him: on this occasion he was charged with "refusing to teach and instruct one or more boys, Children of the Inhabitants of the Town of Ashbourne tho' the same have been offered to him to be taught in the said school and others under the Under Master's care not anyways under the care of the said Mr. Langley" and with beating them "even out of schools hours, in an inhumane manner." At the next meeting of the Governors in December the Vicar of the Parish was appointed Headmaster in his place. Mr. Langley however stayed on and continued to quarrel with successive Undermasters. In March of the next year another Usher or Undermaster was appointed but he only held the post 18 days. The next Usher stayed on until October and then resigned "wearied by the repeated ill-usages of the Headmaster and his Family." The next Usher managed to stay on for over a year but he resigned at last, as the Headmaster, so he said, "hath taken every method in his power to render the charge committed to me irksome and disagreeable to me." He still continued to neglect his duties and the Governors unable or unwilling to get rid of him appealed to the bishop of the diocese for help. At that time there was only one scholar and had been only 2 or 3 for many years past. The minute books do not record what action the Bishop took—but Langley remained Headmaster in spite of everybody and everything until his death at the end of 1795, having been in office 43 years, during 29 of which he also held the Rectory of Fenny Bentley  $2\frac{1}{4}$  miles from Ashbourne.

We knew of Langley from "The Life," but in Boswell's papers discovered at Malahide Castle we hear for the first time the names of the other local friends of Taylor

whom Johnson knew pretty well, and who, as Dr. Powell says, were very different intellectually from the society to which Johnson was accustomed in London and at Streatham.

Boswell writes "It may be proper to put down a list, as far as I can now recollect, of the Company whom I used to meet at Dr. Taylor's." The list begins with

*Mr. and Mrs. Alsop.* John Alsop was one of the executors of Dr. Taylor's will and he inherited a legacy of 500 guineas and the Doctor's gold watch. He lived in Church Street at Vine House not far from Dr. Taylor's, and was visited by Johnson and Mrs. Thrale when they stayed at Ashbourne. In a Directory of Ashbourne for the year 1790 he is given in the list of Gentry, not the Traders, etc. and referred to as a Freeholder and a Justice of the Peace. He was a member of the Old Trust as Taylor himself was.

The next name given by Boswell is *Mr. Longden* whom he describes as "a civil and rather spruce squire, intelligent enough. Has an estate of his own and gets £500 a year as a cheese-factor." He was co-executor with Alsop of Dr. Taylor's will and also received a legacy of 500 guineas. He appears in the Directory of 1790 among the gentry as Robert Longden Esq., Justice of Peace: and he was also a member of the Old Trust. When he died he bequeathed to the Churchwardens of Ashbourne as an addition to the Communion Plate the long silver cup given to him by the Company of Cheesemongers in the city of London.

Next is *Mr. Davenport.* "Formerly Landlord of the Blackamoor's Head Inn at Ashbourne. A shrewd man." The Inn was incorporated with the Green Man early in last century under the title of The Green Man and Black's Head Royal Hotel. The Black's Head was one of the string of inns which stood side-by-side in the main street of the town in the old coaching days. You

would notice an image of the Black's Head on the sign that crosses the street in front of the Hotel in which we are sitting. He is given in the Ashbourne Directory of 1790 as one of the gentry—he had retired from the inn 10 or 11 years before. He witnessed the signature of Dr. Taylor to the indenture conveying the pew in Ashbourne Church from Lord Scarsdale.

*Mrs. and Miss Fletcher.* “The first an ugly widow. The second, a fat old Maid. Both good cheerful women” is the description Boswell gives of them: they were relatives of two Undermasters of the Ashbourne Grammar School and lived in the village of Thorpe 3 miles from Ashbourne.

The next on Boswell's list is *Miss Packer* whom he describes as “a little shrivelled old maid with a pretty good fortune, whom Johnson used to plague with insisting to be in her will for a legacy. A perpetual joke.”

Then came *Two Eminent Tanners* “whose names I forget.” I too am unable to supply the names, as Ashbourne was famous for its tanneries well on into the 19th century and the description would fit quite a number of the Tanners who ran them.

*Counsellor Leigh*, “more squire than counsellor,” comes next in the list. He was a native of Cheadle, Staffordshire, and probably obtained his description of counsellor from belonging to one of those peculiar mock councils which some Pottery towns set up in the 17th and 18th centuries, one of which existed at Cheadle and numbered Edward Leigh among its members. The peculiar phrase used by Boswell “more squire than counsellor” is probably explained by the nature of the office Leigh had held at Cheadle.<sup>1</sup> He bought an estate in the neighbourhood of Ashbourne, and was one of those who dined with Dr. Taylor in 1777 when Boswell visited Ashbourne. He married Elizabeth the fourth daughter of

<sup>1</sup> Dr. L. F. Powell suggests that Leigh was a King's Counsel and Lawyer.

Brian Hodgson, whose name is the last on Boswell's special list.

*Mr. Hodson*, writes Boswell, " who kept the large inn at Buxton and whose daughter is married to the Bishop of Chester, has a handsome house nearly opposite to Dr. Taylor's. But Mr. Hodson is not of his Party."

Brian Hodgson is the most interesting of the friends of Dr. Taylor mentioned by Boswell, though Boswell, as you will notice, says " but Mr. Hodson is not of his Party." At one time Mr. Hodson was landlord of the George at Stamford, Lincs. removing afterwards to the Old Hall Inn near the Crescent at Buxton, where he became also proprietor of the baths and acquired a considerable amount of property. He was the founder of the distinguished county family of the Hodgsons of Clopton Hall. His house adjoined the Old Grammar School. He had a son Brian and a large number of daughters. It was Margaret, the second daughter, who married the Rev. Beilby Porteus, at that time Chaplain to the archbishop of Canterbury and later to become bishop of Chester and later of London. The marriage took place in London but Porteus often came to Ashbourne. Johnson informed Mrs. Thrale in a letter from Ashbourne in 1781 that the Bishop of Chester was staying with his father-in-law, and the Ashbourne Parish Register records two ordinations in Ashbourne Church by the Bishop of Chester, though Ashbourne was then in the diocese of Lichfield and never was in the diocese of Chester.

Porteus was a worldly type of clergyman, as little fitted to be a divine as Taylor himself. Once when Bishop of London he was asked to preach a Charity sermon, but declined, as he said he only preached one sermon of the kind each year and that year's sermon was already bespoken.

Brian Hodgson's death occurred on Dec. 12 1784, one day before Johnson's, and his death is announced in the



*Gentleman's Magazine* immediately above that of Johnson's. He was buried at Ashbourne and a monumental tablet to his memory may be seen on the north wall of the nave of the church. Near by is one also to his son-in-law, Edward Leigh.

It has been stated previously, that Dr. Taylor bred horses; actually his stud-farm was managed by Mr. Walter John Fieldhouse, who distinguished himself by daring to swear in Johnson's presence, and who, as we read in "The Life" attempted to dispute with him, in favour of Mungo Campbell, who shot Alexander, Earl of Eglintoun. Boswell tells us in his Journal, under date 20 Sept. 1777, that "This afternoon there came to stay a while with Dr. Taylor, Mr. Fieldhouse, a farmer in Staffordshire, a brisk, obliging little man, quite upon springs, and pretty well read in the english poets. It seems he keeps some of Dr. Taylor's horses *of blood*, which a Clergyman cannot so well have in his own name, and is in many respects an useful humble friend . . ." <sup>1</sup> Fieldhouse lived at Alrewas, where presumably Dr. Taylor's horses were bred.

There are numbers of other persons whom Johnson met at Ashbourne, but it is impossible to say anything about them here. One more only will I specially mention, and that is the Rev. John Kennedy, Rector of Bradley, a village 3 miles from Ashbourne, one of the seats of the Meynell family, associated in later days with the famous Hugo Meynell, the Father of fox-hunting. Johnson, you will remember, wrote a dedication to the King for Kennedy's first and most important work "A complete system of Astronomical Chronology, unfolding the Scriptures."

Kennedy remained Johnson's friend throughout life, and he and his wife were referred to in one of Johnson's letters to Mrs. Thrale as one of her old Ashbourne friends.

<sup>1</sup> Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, L. F. Powell's edition, vol. III, p. 508.

Both Kennedy and his wife were most eccentric, as also were Kennedy's writings. Their daughter married an Ashbourne cordwainer or cobbler of very little standing, and when Kennedy's wife died he went to live with this daughter in Ashbourne until his own death in 1782.

This brief account of the persons, who, as Boswell states, were those with whom Johnson had most frequently to associate on his visits to Ashbourne, many of them doubtless very worthy persons, must confirm us in our impression that Johnson could not feel any real pleasure or intellectual stimulus in such society, after the galaxy of brilliant intellects with which he was in constant contact in London.

And it seems probable that as time went on Taylor's liking for Johnson's society did not increase, and that life at Ashbourne became more and more wearisome to Johnson himself. He told Boswell in 1779 that Taylor was not now very fond of having him much at his house. "He knows my opinion of his way of living; and no man loves to be continually under the eye of disapprobation."

As early as 1781 Johnson wrote to Mrs. Thrale that "my time past heavily at Ashbourne, yet I could not easily get away, though Taylor, I sincerely think was glad to see me go."—During his last visit in 1784 we hear such complaints from Johnson as that "I have no company; the Doctor is busy in his fields, and goes to bed at nine and his whole system is so different from mine that we seem formed for different elements;" and again "I have little company and little amusement" as he wrote to Dr. Brocklesby; and in another letter, the last he wrote from Ashbourne, "I live in dismal solitude."

It would not be proper to conclude an account of Dr. Johnson's friends in Ashbourne without some reference to Miss Hill Boothby whose friendship was most congenial to Johnson and gave him more pleasure than perhaps that of anyone else in the district.

Miss Boothby was a much earlier acquaintance of Johnson's than those friends of Dr. Taylor whom Boswell wrote about. She became acquainted with Johnson through his frequent visits to Mr. Meynell, the father of Hugo Meynell the fox-hunter, who lived at Bradley. At the same time Johnson met the FitzHerberts of Tissington who were related to the Meynells through the marriage of one of Mr. Meynell's daughters to Wm. FitzHerbert the father of Alleyn FitzHerbert who afterwards became Lord St. Helens.<sup>1</sup> These earlier friends of Dr. Johnson were described by a friend of Miss Lawrence as "in point of elegance and accomplishments inferior to few of those with whom he was afterwards acquainted." Indeed there is evidence that at this time in his life at least, that is at about the age of 31, Johnson, when in Derbyshire, moved in the best society in the county and was in great demand by the ladies. Miss Meynell is the lady who, said Johnson, had the best understanding he ever met with in any human being.

Miss Hill Boothby was the daughter of a Brooke Boothby of Ashbourne Hall and of Elizabeth FitzHerbert, a member of the Somersal Herbert branch of the FitzHerbert family. She was the sister of Sir Brooke Boothby, the 5th baronet, also of Ashbourne Hall, and she was aunt to Sir Brooke Boothby, the 6th baronet, who was the father of Penelope, the child whose monument by Banks in Ashbourne Church is known far and wide.

Johnson and Miss Boothby met first in 1740, their correspondence began in 1753, and she lived only until 1756.

There is an inscription on her tombstone in Ashbourne Church, which was the joint work of Miss Seward and

<sup>1</sup> The title was taken from St. Helen's House, Derby, where Alleyn FitzHerbert was born in 1753. Joseph Wright, A.R.A. lived in this house from 1779 to 1790.

Sir Brooke Boothby, the 6th baronet, who, like so many gentlemen of his day, dabbled in poetry.

The happiness of the days of Johnson's acquaintance with the Meynells, the FitzHerberts, the Boothbys and other Derbyshire families may well close this account of his Ashbourne friendships. It is a reminder that, though his later visits to Ashbourne must often have filled him with sadness and given him but a doubtful pleasure, when he was also burdened with bodily illness and weariness of the flesh, there was a time in the hey-day of his early life when he would doubtless obtain great satisfaction and considerable happiness when visiting his friends in Ashbourne.