

IV.—JOHN PIGG: NEWCASTLE'S PURITAN TOWN SURVEYOR.

BY JOHN OXBERRY, ONE OF THE SECRETARIES.

[Read on 29th February, 1928.]

John Pigg, the subject of this paper, was town surveyor of Newcastle upon Tyne in the middle of the seventeenth century. He was accustomed at one time of his life to walk for exercise every morning from his home in Newcastle to Three Mile Bridge and, out of gratitude to Providence for the health he gained by the practice, raised a pillar by the wayside where his outward walk terminated. (Plate XIII.) This pillar, which later generations nicknamed "Pigg's Folly," was so far utilitarian in its purpose as to be crowned by a triple-faced sundial for the benefit of travellers, but the inscriptions on the sides of the pillar showed that another object Pigg had in view was to propagate his religious views and declare his faith in fresh air and sunshine. It discharged these functions for over a century and a half, and then, owing to an alteration in the line of the road about the year 1829, the pillar was pulled down and the stones used for other purposes. When Richard Welford wrote his *History of Gosforth* he said (p. 25) that the stones had been used for building an adjoining garden wall, and he spent some time trying to find traces of them. "If he had only told me what he was looking for," said the blacksmith who saw him prying about, "I could have shown him where they were, or some of them at any rate."

This information Welford obtained later through the friendly aid of Mr. J. E. Black, of Gosforth, who then had a garden at Three Mile Bridge. Mr. Black learned that there were inscribed stones built into the gable end of the blacksmith's shop, and he copied such of the inscriptions as he could decipher. These copies he submitted to Mr. Welford, who recognized them as fragments of the inscriptions that John Pigg had selected as best suited to serve the purposes for which he had raised his pillar. These stones are still to be seen in the gable end of the building. They have, however, been whitewashed, and a greenhouse has been built in front of them since Welford saw them, and though efforts were recently made to obtain a photograph of them the whitewash and the growing plants foiled the attempt.

This discovery renewed Welford's interest in the subject, and he commenced to gather material with the view of bringing it before our Society. The infirmities of age, ending in the loss of sight, prevented this. The material he had gathered he handed over to the late J. C. Hodgson, of Alnwick, who agreed to write a paper upon the subject. Hodgson had no opportunity of doing this before illness intervened, and, on what proved to be his death-bed, he transferred the papers to me with the request that I should undertake the task. I agreed to do so, and it is in pursuance of this promise that I, after collecting from various sources much additional information, have written this paper.

Very little is known about John Pigg until we meet with a reference to him in the Newcastle Corporation ledger in the third week in October, 1645, when there was

“Paid John Pigg what he disbursed about the church his own wages and his men's. 31s. 5d.”

He is said to have been a weaver originally, and may be identified with the John Pigg, weaver, who was made a freeman of the town in 1635. The leading details of his career, so far as they concern us here, are that he was

town surveyor for Newcastle in puritan times; that he is alleged, in his later years at any rate, to have out-puritaned the puritans in the peculiarities of his dress and manner and in the vigour of his religious fervour. He was evidently a man of unconventional ideas who refused to shape his ways by the uniformity of pattern prescribed by society. He accumulated property and had the thoughtfulness and humanity to dispose of it, by a carefully drawn up will, in such a way as he hoped would benefit the deserving poor of his native district for all time. His good intentions were frustrated for a long while because of the lack of honesty on the part of those into whose hands the property drifted,¹ but eventually, through the action of the Charity Commissioners, his wishes were carried out, and for nearly a century now the legacy he left has rendered material assistance to the poor and the sick who have been compelled to seek medical aid or advice at the Newcastle Royal Infirmary.

The unknown author of the *Memoirs of Ambrose Barnes* is chiefly responsible for the somewhat unenviable reputation borne by Pigg. He set the ball rolling when he declared that the puritan party was sadly blemished by some of those who belonged to it, and cited John Pigg as a flagrant example. On pp. 198-9 of the *Memoirs* he says:

“There was one John Pig well known both to the King and the Duke of York, and, for his giddy singularities noted not onely through the country, but almost through the kingdom. He usually wore a high-crowned hat, a strait coat, and would never ride, but walkt the pace of any horse hundreds of miles on foot with a quarter staff fenced with an iron fork at one end. He was sometimes Land-Surveyor for the town. . . . He would not onely go to prison when he needed not, but conceitedly chused the vilest part of the prison for his apartment, where he continued a long while, when he might have had his liberty whenever he pleased. . . . But as much of heaven's favourite as

¹ “His charitable bequests have been misapplied by some who possessed less enthusiasm but more knavery than honest John Pigg.” Mackenzie's *View of Northumberland* (1811) II, 589.

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this visionary fancied himself, every body knew him to be cursedly covetous, and the end he made answered the disgrace he had thrown upon suffering for religion, this pig dying in his sty, in circumstances not unlike those who lay hands on themselves or die crazy or distracted."

Bourne adds a stone to this cairn of censure by the following extract from the Milbank manuscript :²

" At the end of Barras-Bridge before the Chapel of St. James' stood a stately Cross firm and compleat and John Pigg in the Time of the Rebellion took it down and called it Idolatry, and thought to make his own use of it; but it was broke by some who hated it should be so prophaned."

Alongside this extract Bourne places a marginal note to the effect that

" This Pigg was a rebel, a very great Enthusiast, a Monument of his whimsical Head is that Stone-Pillar a little North of the three Mile Bridge, which very deservedly to this Day, bears the Title of Pig's Folly."

Alderman Hornsby, who was mayor of Newcastle in 1788-89, and whose annotations to Brand have been utilized by some of our local historians, is brought forward by Welford in his *History of Gosforth* (p. 25) as witness to the statement that as late as the middle of the eighteenth century, John Pigg's name and peculiarities were still the theme of conversation in Newcastle. And there is to some extent corroborative evidence of this in Pennant's *Tour to Scotland*. On his way northward Pennant left Newcastle on the 13th July, 1769. At the start, among the things he observed on his way, was

" a large stone column with three dials on the capital, with several scripture texts on the sides called here Pigg's Folly."

Another traveller of a slightly earlier period, Thomas Amory, author of *John Buncke*, and of a much rarer book

² Bourne's *Hist. of Newcastle*, p. 152.

called *Memoirs of the Ladies of Great Britain*, also mentions the pillar and its inscription, but not its nickname. In the latter work he declares that he had travelled many hundreds of miles to visit ancient monuments and discover curious things, and among the strange objects he noted was what in Vol. I, p. 57, he calls,

“the religion of John Pigg, which was written upon a high stone pillar, by the way side near the borders of Scotland.”

Brand, in his allusions to John Pigg and his pillar, was content to accept the verdict of his predecessors, but Mackenzie's political sympathies induced him to question the justice of the criticisms and to explain the abuse by the assumption that the puritanism of John Pigg was

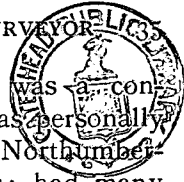
“sufficient to entitle him to the scoffs of the profane and the hatred of bigots.”

George B. Richardson, who edited Ralph Thoresby's *Wayfarings* for the Richardson series of reprints, quotes Mackenzie with evident sympathy, and in a long footnote on page 16 of the tract, has a good deal to say about Pigg and his pillar. Thoresby in his diary under the date September 9th, 1681, when visiting Newcastle makes this entry :

“Morning, finishing my business with some drapers; went to Sandgate to enquire of, and receive some outrents, and at return took horse for Northumberland; about five miles off, transcribed some verses from a monumental pillar, erected in the highway, by John Pigg, the mathematician.”³

It will be noted that Thoresby does not call Pigg by any worse name than that of mathematician, and has no harsher criticism to utter about the pillar than a later generation accepted as evidence of the folly of the builder, than to show himself sufficiently interested in the inscriptions to copy some of them into his notebook.

³ *Ralph Thoresby the Topographer*, by D. H. Atkinson, Vol. I, p. 124.



It ought also to be noted that Thoresby was a contemporary of Pigg, and in all probability was personally acquainted with him. He owned land in Northumberland; often came to Newcastle on business; had many friends, and, at least, one relative there, an uncle, George Thoresby, who, like Thoresby himself, was a draper to trade. George Thoresby occupied a position of sufficient importance in the life of the town to lead to his election as sheriff in the year 1657-58. He belonged to the band of Newcastle nonconformists who, after the Restoration, caused so much concern to bishop Cosin and those who thought with him. Both his name and that of John Pigg appear in a list of dissenters against whom an information was sworn "for being at meetings and conventicles."⁴ Their acquaintance with each other may, therefore, be taken for granted. His nephew, Ralph Thoresby, as his diary shows, was ever on the alert to note down what was curious or uncommon, yet, though he must have been familiar with the life of Newcastle in Pigg's day, we find no hint in what he has written that there was anything in John Pigg's character or conduct that merited adverse comment. To Ralph Thoresby he was simply John Pigg, the mathematician, by no means a dishonourable title, and a title that, to judge by the matter-of-course way that Thoresby uses it, Pigg was fully entitled to and commonly called by.

Ralph Thoresby and the author of the *Memoirs of Ambrose Barnes* are the only two contemporary witnesses that I know of who mention John Pigg and his pillar. Bourne, Brand and the others all spoke of what they had heard or read about Pigg, and not from first-hand knowledge. But there are other contemporary sources which may help us to gain a little more information concerning him. Through the good offices of our fellow-member, Mr. A. M. Oliver, I have examined the Common Council records of Newcastle for the greater part of the period during which Pigg filled the office of town surveyor.

⁴ *Mem. of Amb. Barnes*, p. 408.

The records relating to the later and, probably, the most interesting portion of his career—the years following upon the Restoration—are unfortunately not available, but the earlier books prove him to have been a trusted Corporation official, who, whatever may have happened later, during the Commonwealth period acquitted himself in his office to the satisfaction of the Council.

Entries in which his name occurs are fairly numerous in the Common Council books during the period when the puritans ruled in Newcastle—say from 1645 to 1660—and some of these, apart altogether from their allusions to Pigg, are of interest. But it would unduly prolong this paper to do more than take a few entries that show him engaged in the performance of his daily duties and that bear out the contention that he held a position in the town that would not have been entrusted to the kind of man such as the author of the *Memoirs of Ambrose Barnes* would have us believe Pigg to have been.

From these books it is clear that in the seventeenth century it was customary for members of the Council to investigate for themselves whatever complaints or suggested improvements came before their meetings. They had either more leisure or more conscience then, or had not learned the wisdom of relegating matters for inquiry to their officials. Sub-committees of one or more members were invariably appointed, and when the business related to his department, John Pigg was usually ordered by the Council to attend and assist. One of the earlier entries, dated July, 1647, affords a good example of the Council's method of dealing with matters requiring attention. On that date it was ordered that :

“ Thomas Taylor and the rest of the masons are forthwith to begin their work upon the bridges, and that they take their direction of Mr. William Gibson in doing their work, and John Pigg be appointed to attend Mr. Gibson about the despatch and well-ordering of the said work, and that Mr. Gibson and John Pigg take like care in getting the woodwork done with all expedition.”

William Gibson was a retired master mariner. He was a most active member of the Council, and often figures with John Pigg in rendering service of this kind to the town. In March, 1648, there is an interesting entry in which he and Pigg are again companions. The entry relates to the grant by the Corporation of a site to the Barber-Surgeons' Company, and of stone for the erection of a new meeting-house at the Manors, with a garden attached for the cultivation of medicinal herbs. Gibson and Pigg were to measure off the ground for the meeting-house and garden, and the Council's minute ends up with the order that

"No stones be employed for the house before they be viewed by the Towne-surveyor."

It is a digression, but I am tempted to remark in passing that to antiquaries there is rather a melancholy meaning attached to this order. It tells of the destruction of one of the finest monastic buildings that Newcastle possessed, the priory of the Austin friars. There are other entries in which the same clause occurs, and not a little of John Pigg's time must have been spent in overlooking the destruction of a building that Gray in his *Chorographia* (p. 27) describes as "sumptuous." There is, however, when we recall the date, nothing uncommon in this indifference and callousness. It was about the same period, according to Scott the historian of Berwick (p. 439), that the Corporation of that town bought Berwick castle "for the express purpose of making it a quarry for the erection of a new church."

A score of instances might be quoted to show that from 1645 to 1660 John Pigg was living the life of an ordinary citizen of his time, doing his work for the Common Council day by day, acting as its agent in negotiations, discharging the functions of an expert adviser or skilled helper to its sub-committees, and all this without any sign in the books of the Council that there was reason for dissatisfaction at the way his work

was being done, and nothing whatever that hinted at conduct of an eccentric or irregular kind. For his services the Council paid him a salary of 13s. 4d. a week, as we learn from an entry dated September, 1652, when it was

“ Ordered that John Pigg have a weekly salary of 13s. 4d., as Town-Surveyor.”

This seems a small sum to us, but we can only judge of its value by comparison with the wages paid to others at the same period. Looked at from this standpoint we find that John Pigg was not badly paid. His salary worked out at a trifle less than 2s. 3d. per day. This was just two and a half times greater than the ordinary day labourer of his time received, and one-third more than the earnings of the skilled artisan. Tenpence per day, or five shillings per week, was the wage of the ordinary labourer, and ten shillings per week that of the mason or waller. Measured by this standard the ratio existing between the pay of the foreman and the pay of the men under him to-day, does not differ greatly from that of the period when John Pigg did a week's work for 13s. 4d.

One of the town surveyor's duties in the seventeenth century, as it is in the twentieth, was to guard against encroachments on the public lands and roads, and entries are occasionally found in the Common Council books illustrating a tendency on the part of housebuilders to take a few more yards of land than they had a right to claim. It was John Pigg's business to prevent this, and, in May, 1657, we obtain a glimpse of him going round the streets for the purpose of discovering if anyone had crept beyond the bounds allotted him. The minute under the heading of “ Encroachments,” reads :

“ Ordered by the Common Counsell that John Pigg goe through the severall streetes within the Towne and take a view of all such buildings as he conceives are encroachments and deliver a note of the same in writing on Monday morning next.”

Numerous similar extracts might have been given, but the few selected will have sufficed to indicate the nature of the work that John Pigg was called upon to perform. By the aid of these entries in the Common Council books, we are able to watch him during fifteen of the best years of his life, engaged in his daily tasks, and nowhere in the records, as has been already intimated, do we find the slightest trace of a complaint against him. But at the end of the fifteen years there comes a change. The reign of the puritan in Newcastle, as in the rest of England, was nearing its close. And John Pigg was a puritan. As such he was not likely to be favourably looked upon by the opposition, and at this time the opposition was growing in strength. Party power was shifting over, and some men in high places were changing over with it. In January, 1660, Monk and his army, advancing through Northumberland on their way southward, were met outside Newcastle "by great multitudes of the common people, and welcomed by loud acclamations."⁵ Anticipations of change were in the air. Cavalier and puritan alike foresaw the coming of the king, and the time-server who belonged to whatever party was likeliest to win was equally alive to the advancing tide of feeling that was sweeping through the country. It was in this atmosphere of expectation, two months after General Monk had been welcomed by the populace of Newcastle, and two months prior to the still wilder welcome extended to Charles II on his arrival in London, that John Pigg received his first rebuke from the Common Council. That there was some connection between the change and the rebuke may be conjectured. But, be this as it may, it is certain that in March, 1660, he was in disgrace, and in the eyes of the Council had been disloyal to the interests of the town. What the full details of the trouble were, and what the end of it all was, we have no means of ascertaining, for the Council minute book for the early years of the Restoration is missing. What we know is

⁵ Brand, *Hist. of Newcastle*, II, p. 469.

that he was charged with neglect of duty in not preventing, or not reporting, an alleged infringement of the rights of the Corporation. An entry in the minutes reveals the Council's indignation; there our information stops, and for our knowledge of the remainder of his career we must rest content with the scattered references that are to be met with in the pages of our historians and annalists.

Twenty-eight more years of life were before him when we lose sight of him doing his work as town surveyor. Of his activities and exploits during these years we know very little. This is a pity, because it was in the latter period of his career that his peculiarities of dress and conduct developed into a tradition for future generations to talk about. In 1665 he incurred the hostility of the Incorporated Company of Bricklayers of Newcastle, apparently by taking contracts for the execution of work that should only be undertaken by members of the Bricklayers' Company. Guild rules in the seventeenth century were, in this respect, drawn up very much on the lines of the trades union rules of to-day. John Pigg the weaver, whatever his skill or knowledge of building, must not be permitted to trespass on the company's monopoly. This he had evidently been guilty of doing, so they passed a resolution, quoted in full on page 24 of Welford's *History of Gosforth*, "that noe brother of the said company shall be employed to work by or with John Pigg," under pain of "forfeiting 40s., unforgiven" for his fault.

In 1669 he is again in trouble with many more of his fellow-citizens—among them several ex-mayors and ex-sheriffs—for going to "meetings and conventicles" instead of going to church. Cuthbert Nicholson was the chief witness against him and his companions. This loyal friend of law and order was no doubt the same Cuthbert Nicholson who, in 1650, was sent across the Borders to bring the witchfinder from Edinburgh to purge Newcastle of its witches, and so well did the witchfinder

succeed in his mission (at £3 a head for convictions), that in the August of that year, on a single day fifteen so-called witches and a wizard were hanged on Newcastle town moor.

We cannot be certain when John Pigg ceased to act as town surveyor for Newcastle, but in all probability it was in 1666. Brand (Vol. II, p. 364) alludes to the appointment on the 27th March in that year of Henry Moore to be town surveyor, and through overlooking what he himself had written on another page, speaks of the record of the appointment as "the earliest account of the officer termed town surveyor in the Common Council books." Here, we know Brand was in error, for John Pigg, as we have seen, was specifically mentioned as town surveyor at least as early as 1647.

Following upon the loss of his Newcastle appointment, we find Pigg mentioned as road surveyor for the county of Northumberland. When he obtained this office we cannot tell, but we know when and why he was dismissed. In "the presentment of the grand jury for the county of Northumberland at the assizes holden at the high castle of Newcastle, the 7th day of August, A.D. 1683,"⁶ we are given the reason for his discharge and the name and qualifications of his successor. The paragraph is worth quoting as an illustration of the method adopted of filling a situation in the times when it was written, and not only adopted but advertised as an action that was expected to stand to the credit of those who did it.

"And whereas John Pigg hath lately been removed from the office of surveyor of high-wayes for this county, chiefly upon account of his nonconformity, we doe here present George Barkass of Quarry house as a loyall person, a good churchman, and very fit to doe this county good service in that office."

In worldly circumstances Pigg seems to have prospered during the period with which we are dealing. He had

⁶ *Proc. Newc. Soc. Antiq.*, 2nd ser., X, p. 188.

inherited or acquired three dwelling-houses on the east side of Pilgrim Street, Newcastle, with a large garden extending behind as far as the Erick Burn. This property was represented in recent times by Whitehouse Buildings and the old Turkish Baths, and was bought by the Newcastle Corporation in 1904 for the new Market Street extension. Carliol House now occupies part of the site and Market Street the remainder. He owned two farms at Earsdon and a copyhold dwelling-house let separately from the farms. One of the farms he bought in 1671, and in 1676 he erected the pillar at Three Mile Bridge, so that if he went strangely clad and lived in a pig-stye it can hardly have been because he could not afford to do otherwise. His mind may have become unbalanced in his later years, and yet the will that was drawn up in October, 1688, three months before he died,⁷ is hardly the will we should expect from a man with an unbalanced mind. It has been published in pamphlet form, and its terms are to be found in Mackenzie's *History of Newcastle*, Dr. Hume's *History of Newcastle Infirmary* and elsewhere. They need not be repeated here, but in broad outline it may be stated that he left the great^s bulk of his property—and I am here going to quote from the wording of a notice board that is hanging in the out-patients' waiting-room at the infirmary—"to such poor people in the counties of Durham, Northumberland and Newcastle upon Tyne as the trustees shall think fit, so as such poor people have not cast themselves into poverty by idleness, or reduced themselves to beggary by their own riotous prodigality, but were by sickness or decrepidness disabled from work." These hardly read like the unconsidered words or confused provisions contained in the will of a crazy man, or a man possessed by "giddy singularities."⁸ The

⁷ He was buried at St. Andrews, Newcastle, on the 27th January, 1689.

⁸ The trustees of the will were all men occupying good positions, and included the mayor and sheriff of the town, and a member of the Common Council.



reservation that only the unfortunate and not the wasteful should be helped does not, perhaps, fit in with present-day ideas and theories. But there are still some who believe in helping those who have tried to help themselves, and who will be inclined to commend rather than censure John Pigg for his wish to aid the deserving in preference to the undeserving.

There is no necessity for us to trace the history of the Pigg Charity to appreciate its benefits. It has already been pointed out that for many years it was diverted from its purpose. For nearly a century and a half the worthy poor were despoiled of their due by the misappropriation of the income derived from the property. It was wrested from its illegal holders, who were the descendants of Lancelot Cramlington, the last survivor of the original trustees appointed under the will, by an order of the High Court of Chancery dated November 2nd, 1832. The first year it contributed, according to the infirmary balance sheet, a modest £170; the next year this had risen to £186. As time went on the property increased in value, and other changes occurred until now John Pigg's bequest to the poor is bringing in on an average between £530 and £540 every year to the funds of the Royal Infirmary, and the figures, kindly supplied me by the House Governor and Secretary, Mr. S. Dunstan, enables me to add that during the last twenty-one years the activities and usefulness of one of the finest and most needed of our local public institutions have been furthered by a total cash contribution to its finances from the Pigg Charity of £11,177 17s. 7d.

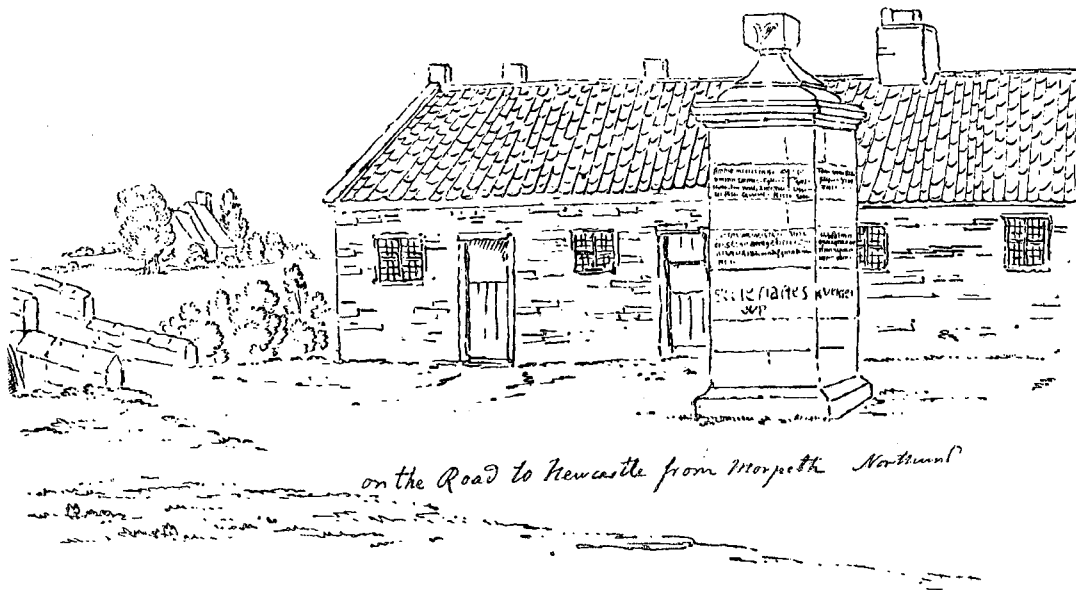
So much for the Charity. Now let us turn for a little while to glance at the pillar by the wayside which men pointed to with laughter for many years and christened "Pigg's Folly." Some few of the inscriptions that adorned the pillar have been preserved, and the general drift of the others we know. They consisted of scraps of holy writ and maxims in verse. A specimen—one of the inscriptions rescued by Ralph Thoresby when he halted on his journey to inspect the pillar in September, 1681, has

been occasionally reprinted, and may be seen on page 19 of George B. Richardson's tract *The Wayfarings of Ralph Thoresby*. It is an address to wisdom, and, like its companion inscriptions, was meant to inculcate lessons that Pigg conceived would help mankind on the path to health and happiness. Outside our chapels and churches in recent years men have instituted the practice of pasting on the notice boards short aphoristic phrases that people may read as they pass. "The wayside pulpit" is the name that has been given to the device. The men who originated this idea, or who act up to it, are swayed by the same spirit as John Pigg when he erected his wayside pulpit at Three Mile Bridge. They are anxious to improve the world, and have persuaded themselves that this is one method of helping to do it. We do not call their action folly; we give them credit for the good intentions that influence them. And whatever other generations may have done, it seems not unreasonable to suggest that John Pigg deserves from us equal credit for the intentions that prompted him to undertake the cost and trouble of raising his pillar where men might see it and, as he hoped, profit by the inscriptions he placed on it. It seems a testimony to his goodness rather than his folly that he should have done this. But, from his case it would seem as though—to slightly alter a well-known quotation,

"The folly that men do lives after them,
The good is oft interrèd with their bones."

For many years it has been so with John Pigg. We have known him as the builder of "Pigg's Folly" rather than as the founder of "Pigg's Charity." One of the objects of this paper has been to try to show that the Charity was a substantial benefaction deserving of public gratitude, that the "Folly" was not a folly, and that John Pigg's claim to be remembered by his fellow North-countrymen should rest upon his philanthropy and not upon his eccentricity or his fanaticism.

Thanks are due to the Northumberland History



on the Road to Newcastle from Morpeth Northumberland

PIGG'S FOLLY AT THREE MILE BRIDGE.
From a sketch in the British Museum, by S. H. Grimm.



Committee for the loan of the block illustrating this article. The pillar has been often described; it is here for the first time illustrated. The view is reproduced from a sketch, made about 1780, and included in the Kaye collection of prints and drawings in the British Museum. The artist, S. H. Grimm, is already well known to archæologists in this district, and is said to have been distinguished for the accuracy of his topographical draughtsmanship.