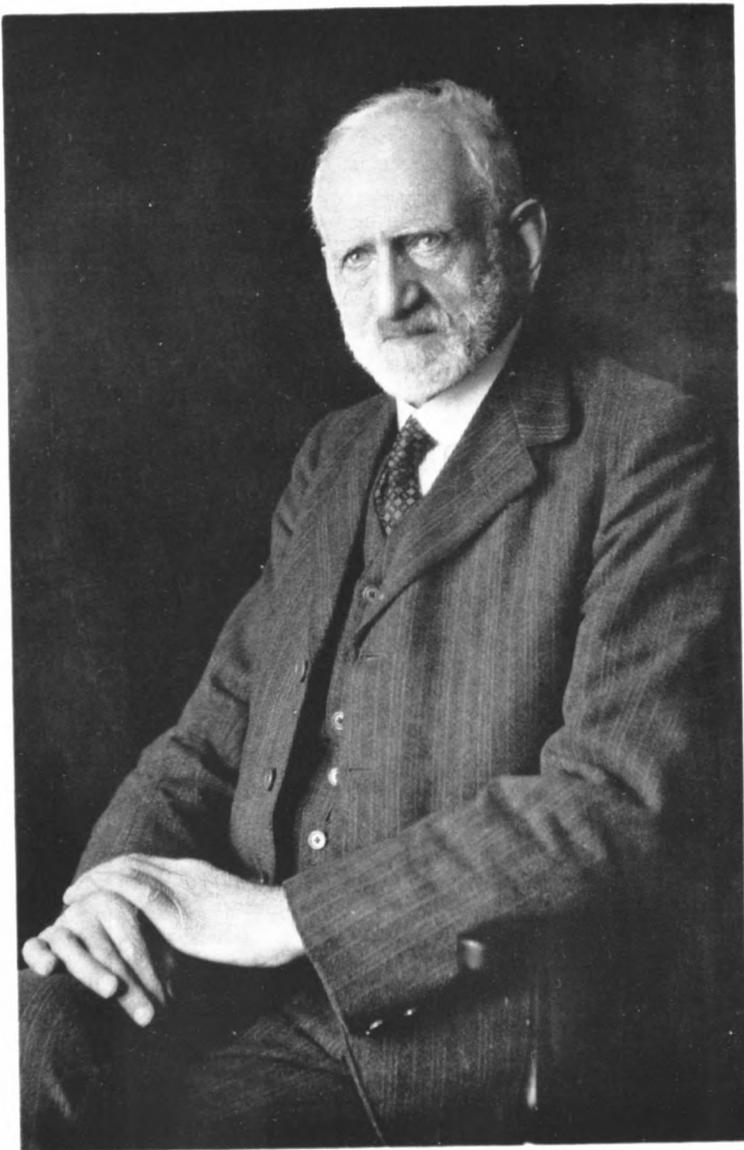




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Plate XII.



JOHN OXBERRY.

IX.—JOHN OXBERRY.

BY PAUL BROWN.

[Read on 28th February 1940.]

John Oxberry was born at Windy Nook, in the county of Durham, on October 4th, 1857, and died at his home, in Grasmere Street, Gateshead, on January 2nd of this year. His life was a long and, as he wished it to be, a useful one; not least of its usefulness being directed into channels of work for this society.

That he was a man of strong character was evident to all who came in contact with him, and it is not without interest to consider some of the early influences which, in his case, assisted the process of character-building.

His father, also John Oxberry, was a working-man who, in an age of frequently unimaginative, and often heartless, industrialism, laboured unselfishly for improvement in the living and working conditions of his fellows. A clear thinker, he saw not only the necessity for reform from above, but also the importance of self-help on the part of the workers themselves. He set himself strenuously to the promotion of study, temperance, thrift and co-operation, and his success gained for him the high appreciation of prominent reformers of his day.

John Oxberry, senior, had as his associates men with similar ideals, and, as was inevitable, his youthful son heard and saw much which had a direct influence upon his character.

The son, when old enough, was entered a scholar at the Royal Grammar School, Newcastle, which was, at that time, in Charlotte Square. His head master was the Rev.

James Snape, a man of scholarly attainments and an excellent teacher.

It is possible to picture the schoolboy trudging daily from Windy Nook to school, and home again, but not possible to follow completely the route he took because, in more recent years, some of the by-lanes he travelled have entirely disappeared. In later life his reminiscences of those journeys were both interesting and valuable, because he had always been observant and was able to describe from personal recollection parts of Newcastle and Gateshead as they were three quarters of a century ago.

When the time came to leave school, employment was found for him in an engineering works, and, but for his answering a call to adventure, some few years later, he might have made engineering his career. Instead, when he had reached the important age of twenty-one he sailed to the other side of the world to test his luck in the gold-fields of New Zealand.

All the world was young to him then, and, for two and a half years, he "roughed it," managing to support himself reasonably well but never being fortunate enough to make one of those "lucky strikes" which bring sudden wealth.

He decided to try Australia, and sailed in a collier brig to Newcastle, New South Wales. With a companion he wandered up country, encountering, at times, hardship and adventure. For a period he worked as a blacksmith, and often afterwards declared that his labour at the forge had been of inestimable value to him in making him strong and in laying the foundation of that remarkably good health which he so long enjoyed.

In all he spent five years in the colonies. He acquired there no considerable worldly fortune, but it was a sturdy, self-reliant young man who was homeward bound in 1883.

Returning to his native Tyneside he found congenial employment, married happily, and settled down. He was appointed School Board Officer at Felling, and continued

in that service until he obtained the post of Relieving Officer, under the Gateshead Board of Guardians. In 1917 he was promoted to the position of Superintendent Registrar of the Gateshead district, an office which he held until his retirement in 1930.

When it was that he first began to accumulate his store of local records it is now impossible to say, but it must have been at an early age, because he confessed to having hoarded some of his treasures for more than sixty years. Booklets, programmes, hand-bills, photographs, and engravings which he thought might be useful to later historians, and, incidentally, to himself, went into his portfolios, drawers and cupboards. He pasted thousands of newspaper cuttings into his scrap-books which, in time, became veritable mines of reference. Only those who have attempted to accomplish such a task in workman-like manner can have a true conception of the enormous amount of patient toil involved. Many start full of enthusiasm, but few last out the race.

He was indefatigable in his search for books of a local character, and many a rarity fell into his hands. Gradually he built up a well-stocked working library of use not only to himself but to others, for he was ever most generous in lending the volumes he had acquired.

His books, his manuscripts and his cuttings he knew intimately, and they were the foundation of that plentiful store of local knowledge which he was able to use so well.

He joined this society in 1906, largely, I think, through the influence of Richard Welford, whose intimate friendship he long enjoyed and treasured. He soon gave indication of being an active and useful member, contributing papers and notes with increasing frequency. He formed, too, many lasting friendships. Almost his last words to me were, "I have always been glad that I joined the society, because it has brought me into touch with men I have considered it an honour to know."

He was elected to the Council of the society in 1913,

was appointed secretary in 1927 and, in 1937, succeeded the late Sir Arthur M. Oliver as one of its vice-presidents. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, London, in 1934.

The duties of a secretary of this society are not light. In addition to what may be termed routine work he has to deal, by letter and telephone, with the large number of people who are in quest of information. Authors, newspaper men, members of kindred societies and intending visitors to the district who want to be told what to see, and how best to see it, all help in keeping the secretary from becoming rusty.

John Oxberry spared himself no trouble in his endeavours to supply that which was required. The more difficult it was to obtain the more he was on his mettle. A character in one of J. M. Barrie's plays is made to remark that it is "an awful sight to see a Scotsman on the make." I have sometimes thought that a not altogether dissimilar sight was that of John Oxberry pursuing clues to some elusive data for which he had been asked.

He was an admirable secretary, and, until the time came when he welcomed with gratitude the co-operation of Mr. H. L. Honeyman, he shouldered the full burden with much credit to himself and to the society.

Until a few years ago the office of secretary carried with it certain additional work affording one of those changes of employment which are reputed to amount to a holiday. This was the editorship of the society's *Proceedings*.

Those of us who have occasion to refer to the volumes which bear John Oxberry's name upon their title-pages realize how able an editor he was. In them, as in preceding and succeeding volumes, are to be found a great number of papers, notes, and annotations for which he was personally responsible, and which preserve for us, and for future generations, much valuable local historical, biographical and topographical information which, but for him, would almost certainly have been lost.

To *Archæologia Aeliana* he contributed a number of excellent memoirs of distinguished members of our society. Among them were: Robert Blair, Richard Welford, W. W. Tomlinson, John George Hodgson, C. C. Hodges, Sidney Storey Carr and Robert Cecil Hedley.

His writing was always informative and bore evidence of the store he set upon accuracy. Yet when imagination could be brought suitably into play he used it cleverly. His paper on "The Diary of Major Sanderson of Hedleyhope," printed in volume xvi, 3rd series, of *Archæologia Aeliana*, is an example of this happy combination of factual and imaginative writing. It is, in my opinion, John Oxberry at his best both as historian and possessor of a charming literary style.

Another of his papers which is a similar combination of accuracy and good writing is to be found in volume v, 4th series, of *Archæologia Aeliana*. It is his admirably told story of "John Pigg, Newcastle's Puritan Town Surveyor."

It was always a matter of regret to our late colleague that he never acquired the art of addressing a meeting without reading from manuscript. I have sometimes wondered why, with his remarkably good memory, and apparent freedom from nervousness, he had never been able to do so. He made up for the disability by reading distinctly, and what he read was worth listening to.

It is, I believe, the desire of every true craftsman that something, at least, of what he has done shall be remembered. It comes with realization that it is a human duty to make the best use of such talents as have been lent for a life-time.

John Oxberry hoped that, within his limitations, which as a wise man he recognized, he had been able to make a contribution which would not be entirely forgotten. For his own part he was punctilious in remembering the worthy contributions of others.

Like most of us he had his "heroes," one of whom was

Admiral Lord Collingwood, and it will be recalled that in 1910 he was foremost in organizing the local centenary celebration of the death of that great sailor and great gentleman.

Thomas Bewick was another for whose memory he had profound respect, and he was largely responsible for the Bewick centenary celebrations in Newcastle and Gateshead in 1928.

As I have indicated, his interest in our society was very real. Sometimes it expressed itself in the form of generous giving. Recognizing the desirability of establishing a "nest egg" from which special purchases for our library might be made, he gave the very handsome donation of £150, and thus the "John Oxberry librarian's emergency book fund" came into being.

Numerous other examples of his generosity could be cited, and one of them has proved of especial benefit. He discovered, and was by no means alone in discovering, that the winding stair at the Black Gate is only a matter of indifference to the young and energetic. At a cost of between £30 and £40 he had a handrail installed, since when the breath of many of our members has been sufficiently conserved to enable them to bless his name!

In writing this memoir I have laid particular stress upon our late member's work for, and benefactions to, this society, but any account of him which did not include some reference to his valuable services elsewhere would be sadly incomplete.

He was, first and foremost, a Gateshead man. His interest in the history, development and welfare of the borough never flagged. He was jealous of its rights and deplored long-past actions by which some of its rights had been surrendered. He has sometimes been described as the "Historian of Gateshead." He was also its champion.

I believe that if he had lived in an earlier time when the men of Newcastle made frequent attempts to seize more than their lawful share of Tyne Bridge, they would gener-

ally have found John Oxberry at the *Blue Stone* ready, and perfectly willing, to take vigorous part in thrusting them back again.

The Library, the Art Gallery and the Museum in Gateshead received his enthusiastic and generous support. To the Library he presented a valuable collection of books and prints. He was for thirty years a member of the Gateshead Public Libraries Committee, and served as chairman of the Books and House Committee. To the Art Gallery he made the important presentation of an epidiascope, and to the Museum in Saltwell Park he made numerous gifts.

He was chairman of the Gateshead Dispensary; was vice-chairman of the local branch of the N.S.P.C.C., and was ever active in associating himself with the many good causes which had his sympathy. Only those who knew him intimately realized the extent of his generosity.

A voluminous writer, he was a frequent, and in some cases, a regular contributor to local newspapers and other publications. He wrote the "Centenary History of St. Mary's Church, Gateshead," "The Birth of a Movement," which was an historical account of the Durham Aged Miners' Homes, and a great many other literary sketches, all of which contained evidence of that vast local knowledge which he had made his own. Unlike some men who write a great deal he was extremely methodical and, even in old age, his industry was something at which to wonder.

That Gateshead was proud of him was manifested on December 22nd, 1938, when he was publicly presented with the Honorary Freedom of the Borough. It was indeed a well-deserved honour.

Those of us who saw him when he made his last appearance among us at one of our monthly meetings retain a memory of a venerable old gentleman who was obviously in ill-health. He did not then know how ill he was, and it was typical of him that, in spite of severe physical pain, he had made the effort to discharge his duty as he saw it. From that frail figure the strength of John Oxberry the

blacksmith had vanished. His course was nearly run. Shortly before the end he asked that he might be carried down into his study, and there, among his much-loved books, he died. It was a fitting close to his long and well-spent life.

He is survived by two sons, Mr. Sydney Oxberry who holds an editorial post in New York, and Mr. John A. Oxberry, of Glasgow, who is engaged in work for the Ministry of Shipping.

