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John Horsley and the Presbyterian Chapel in Morpeth

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SUMMARY

*The Revd. John Horsley (1685–1732) has an enduring reputation as a Presbyterian minister, schoolmaster and scholar of the history and archaeology of Roman Britain, author of the monumental *Britannia Romana*, as well as being a leading scientific lecturer and meteorological observer. This short paper sets out to record the fact – which seems to have gone unnoticed by writers on Horsley’s life and scholarship – that the original Presbyterian chapel built for Horsley in the 1720s still survives in Morpeth today.*

INTRODUCTION

The Revd. John Horsley FRS (1685–1732) was Presbyterian minister and schoolmaster in Morpeth from before 1709 until his death in 1732. Horsley has a major and enduring reputation as one of England’s leading eighteenth-century antiquaries, a key figure in the history of Roman archaeology in Britain and author of *Britannia Romana* (1732).¹ He also has a scientific reputation as a pioneering public lecturer on Newtonian science in the north, and as a meteorological observer and correspondent with James Jurin, Secretary of the Royal Society, to which Horsley was elected a Fellow in 1729.²

Apart from his published works and some surviving letters (several of which have only recently been rediscovered), Horsley left little estate. His collection of inscribed Roman stones became part of the Hunter collection in Durham, and survives in the Durham Chapter collection,³ whilst his scientific instruments passed through the hands of several prominent

scientific lecturers until they were placed in Dr William’s Library in London. The instrument box itself survived into the 1930s, though it cannot now be traced.⁴ Horsley left behind no portrait or engraving, and although his death is recorded in the Morpeth parish register, there is no gravestone.⁵ From John Hodgson’s time, historians and archaeologists have lamented the lack of any memorial to him, and in 1932 a bronze plaque was placed on St George’s Presbyterian Church in Morpeth to commemorate John Horsley:

for 23 years minister of this church, Master of Arts in the University of Edinburgh, Fellow of the Royal Society, who died at Morpeth January 12th 1732 aged 46. This tablet was dedicated in 1932, two hundred years after the publication of his book *Britannia Romana* to record his services to learning as explorer and historian of Roman Britain and to preserve his memory in the town where he lived and taught.

St George’s Church is a building dating from the 1860s, well over a century after Horsley’s death, but what none of the studies of Horsley have noted is that the original Presbyterian chapel built for him in the 1720s, and in which he preached for a decade, still survives in Morpeth today. The existence of the chapel itself of course is recorded by architectural historians, and it is noted in both editions of Pevsner’s *Northumberland* and by Honeyman,⁶ but writers on John Horsley seem to have missed the survival, and the purpose of this short paper is to make the connection explicit.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHAPEL

Before the early 1720s, the Morpeth Presbyterians did not have a dedicated chapel, but



Fig 1 The former Presbyterian chapel in Cottingwood Lane, Morpeth.

met in houses. However, in 1721 a group of trustees bought a plot of land near the foot of Cottingwood Lane.⁷ This land had once belonged to Newminster Abbey, but was then owned by a William Crawford, who sold it to the trustees. The indenture of 20 July 1721 named the Presbyterian Trustees as Sir William Middleton Bt. of Belsay Hall, John Cay Esq. of South Shields, Reynolds Hall of Newbiggin, Cumberland Leach of Belsay, Benjamin Bennet of Newcastle, Jonathan Harle MD of Alnwick, and John Horsley, gentleman of Widdrington. This 'John Horsley of Widdrington' was not the Revd. John Horsley, but another man who has often been confused with him, being a land-agent who acted for the York Buildings Company after they acquired Widdrington Castle and estate after the forfeiture of the Jacobite Lord Widdrington.⁸

The chapel in Cottingwood Lane was built to a rectangular plan, and had the typical features associated with eighteenth-century nonconformist chapels, with two large arched windows in the middle and two smaller windows over the doorways in the outer bays. The elegant façade was built of brick, with stone quoins and sills, whilst the gable-end walls were of rougher stone.

John Horsley seems to have been a dedicated and successful pastor. The chapel was built after he had been minister for at least 12 years, and he would have preached in it throughout the last ten years of his life. Unfortunately there is little explicit record of his pastoral life in Morpeth, except for a note in one of his letters to Robert Cay (dated June 26 1728) from the town: 'I am to preach on Friday afternoon, but shall be at liberty about 3 o' the' clock'.⁹ He also preached to other Northumberland meetings, recording 'I preached at Birdhope Craig' on Wednesday February 5 1728/29, and was clearly very well regarded by fellow-Presbyterians north of the border – on one occasion he notes 'Wednesday night I lodg'd at Kelso being detained by ye ministers of ye synod who hap'ned to be met there'.¹⁰ Horsley also wrote two theological tracts, one of which was titled *Vows in Trouble, Or a Plain and Practical Discourse concerning the Nature of Vows*

*made in Trouble; and the Reasonableness and Necessity of a faithful Performance of them.*¹¹

An expanding population and growing prosperity in the mid-nineteenth century led to the Morpeth Presbyterians commissioning a new church, designed by M. Thompson, in 1860. This church – St George's – was built on the site of one of Morpeth's mills, adjacent to the bridge in Bridge Street, and is often featured on photographs and postcards of Morpeth. Horsley's chapel in Cottingwood Lane was no longer required for services, and later became used as a school, 'somewhat marred in conversion thereto', Honeyman noted.¹² In turn this use became redundant, until a successful and sensitive restoration as a private house in 1987 (fig. 1).

Here is the very chapel in which John Horsley preached during his ministry in the 1720s, and it deserves recognition, both in the Horsley literature and in the Morpeth heritage landscape. Perhaps, before the tercentenary of Horsley's death, it might be marked in some appropriate way.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Mr. Walton, present owner of the former chapel, for allowing me to view and photograph the building.

NOTES

¹ The main accounts of Horsley's biography are: John Hodgson, *Memoirs of the Lives of Thomas Gibson, M.D., Jonathan Harle, M.D., John Horsley, M.A., F.R.S., William Turner, M.D.*, Newcastle (1831); John Hodgson Hinde, 'Notes on the Rev. John Horsley', *AA*², 6, 174–180; Alexander Gordon, 'John Horsley', *Dictionary of National Biography [DNB]*, 27 (1891), 382–3; D. B. Haycock, 'John Horsley', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford. Available at: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13819> (Accessed: 28 August 2006); John Crawford Hodgson, 'Remains of John Horsley the historian', *AA*³, 15 (1918), 57–79; Sir George Macdonald, 'John Horsley, scholar and gentleman', *AA*³, 10 (1933), 1–57; and

R. C. Bosanquet, 'John Horsley and his times', *AA*³, 10 (1933), 58–81.

² Leslie W. Hepple, 'John Horsley, James Jurin and the Royal Society Meteorological Network', *AA*⁵, 32 (2003), 153–170.

³ R. P. Wright, 'The Roman inscriptions in the collection of the Dean and Chapter of Durham', *DN*², 6 (1982), 93.

⁴ Macdonald, 'John Horsley', 10. Macdonald saw a 'small box' in 1932.

⁵ The parish register baldly records: 'January 15th [1732 new style] – This day buried Mr. John Horsley'. Macdonald, 'John Horsley', 1.

⁶ N. Pevsner and I. Richmond, *Northumberland* (Buildings of England), Harmondsworth (1957),

216; N. Pevsner and I. Richmond (2nd edition revised by J. Grundy *et al.*), *Northumberland* (Buildings of England), London (1992), 399–400; H. L. Honeyman, *Northumberland*, London (1949), 173.

⁷ J. Hodgson, *A History of Morpeth*, Newcastle (1832), 77.

⁸ See J. C. Hodgson, 'Remains of John Horsley', 76–77, and Hepple, 'John Horsley, James Jurin', 166–167.

⁹ John Hodgson, *Memoirs*, 118.

¹⁰ J. C. Hodgson, 'Remains', 63 and 66.

¹¹ Macdonald, 'John Horsley', 14.

¹² Honeyman, *Northumberland*, 173.