

## SIR JOHN CASS AND HIS SCHOOL.

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BY

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OUR chief sources of information are:—(1) Occasional brief notices in newspapers, Parliamentary journals, State papers, etc.; (2) the Court Rolls of the Manor of Hackney for particulars of the gradual acquisition of the Cass estate; (3) the Newcome MSS. in Tyssen Amherst Library in Hackney Town Hall; (4) the early Minute Books of the Foundation School (these give full accounts of the founding of the School, but tell nothing of Sir John Cass himself).

The Cass family was probably of French extraction—originally de la Caisse. A family of this name left France to avoid persecution in the latter part of the sixteenth century, and settled in London.

The father of Sir John Cass was Thomas Cass, “Master Carpenter to the Ordnance” at a “fee of eightpence a day,” and a member of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters. He lived in Crutched (Crossed or Crouched) Friars, and was a friend of Samuel Pepys.

The first contemporary record of John Cass is in the Register of the Church of S. Botolph, Aldgate:—“1660 (old style), Ffebruary 28th, John Cass, son to Thomas Cass and Martha his wife: born 20th Feby., baptised 28th—Rosemary.” The last word indicates that he was born in Rosemary Lane, East Smithfield.

In 1664 the Plague increased, and in 1665 Thomas Cass sought greater security by removing to Hackney, then a village of about 1,000 inhabitants. There he acquired a considerable estate, and died in 1699. He was buried in the family vault in the old Whitechapel Church (St. Mary Matfelon).

Nothing is known of the boyhood, education or pursuits of John Cass. At the time of his father's death he was already respected in Hackney, as we read in the Newcome MS. under May 1st, 1699: "John Cass, Esq., chosen a [select] Vestryman in the room of his father, deceased," and on the same date that "Mr. Cass's pew allowed to Mr. Higham and Mr. Blackmore for £8." We shall see later that the Rev. Peter Newcome was not friendly to John Cass, and giving up the family pew suggests that this dislike was reciprocated.

At first John Cass continued his father's policy in using his capital in the further acquisition of land at Hackney. He was, however, attracted to the City rather than to Hackney. Hackney was not a creditable village; it was, in spite of small population, frequently the scene of mysterious murders—"on Hackney Downs, on Hackney Common, in a ditch at Clopton, in a street at Hummerton," in four successive years.

He obtained the grant of a coat of arms and crest; the original grant is now in the Tyssen Amherst Library, and need not be reproduced here.

In a collection of coats of arms of persons connected with Hackney another design appears over the name of Cass—the arms as in the official grant, but for the crest "a pair of scales proper."

Some important facts in his life may be thus chronicled:—

- 1709.—John Cass elected Alderman of Ward of Portsoken.
- 1710.—Chosen M.P. for City. Foundation School in the Ward of Portsoken opened.
- 1711.—Master of Worshipful Company of Carpenters.
- 1713.—Re-elected M.P. Presented petition in Parliament against commercial treaty with France. One of a deputation to Queen Anne to offer the congratulations of the City Corporation on the Peace of Utrecht. Knighted.
- 1714.—Retired from the Commission of Peace of Hackney. Health failing.
- 1718.—Died suddenly.

In the Newcome MS. we read: “1718, July 5, Dyed Sr John Cass, Knight and Alderman, at his house in Grove Street, being abroad on the 3rd, in his 57th year, leaving his Lady childless, and most of his state to charitable uses, dying before he could sign his last will, leaving one made nine years before, which is likely to stand contrary to his intention.”

Death was immediately due to hæmorrhage of the lungs, and the quill pen he was using to sign his will was stained with his blood. This was commemorated for many years on each Founder's Day (February 20th) by the children of the School wearing a red feather. He was buried at Whitechapel. Whitechapel Church has since been twice destroyed by fire, and there are no remains of his tomb. “Sir John Cass, Knt. and

Alderman, dyed ye 5th, and was buried from Iron-mongers' Hall in Fen Church St. in St. Mary White Chappel on ye 15th day July 1718."

The Rev. Peter Newcome writes: "Sir John Cass was buried from Iron Mongers' Hall in Fenchurch Street in London at St. Mary, Whitechapel, preceded by 50 Boys and 40 girls of Aldgate singing all in mourning and Trophies. . . . He was buried July 15th, the pulpit of Hackney was hung with Black, July 18th, which was stolen away the 25th [the thieves] breaking open the door of Mr. Beauvoir's gallery. . . . A haughty reserved man, neither loving nor beloved in the Parish."

Such are the terms of the only contemporary description of the character of Sir John Cass. These few pungent words are all that the Rev. Peter Newcome could find to describe his most distinguished parishioner. The *fragmentary character of the personal information* we possess renders it peculiarly difficult to decide as to the degree of truth in the above strictures, but we can judge the man by his works. We are taught that good fruit is brought forth by a good tree, that a corrupt tree produces evil fruit. Now if we attempt to sum up the character of Sir John Cass from the evidence offered both by the public work he performed and by the beneficent projects he originated, and for the continuance of which he liberally provided, and to fit our result in with the opinion held of him by Mr. Newcome, we get some such contradictory conclusions as these:—He was "haughty and reserved," yet his neighbours, both in Hackney and in the City, elected him to the highest offices which they could bestow; he was "neither

loving nor beloved," yet he spent his time and substance in benefiting those—the children of the poor of Aldgate—who least could yield him any return whatever but that of humble affection.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE SCHOOL.—Two schools compete for the honour of being the first-established Protestant free schools for the children of the poor—one is the St. Botolph Aldgate Parochial School, founded in 1688, and now amalgamated with the Sir John Cass School; the other was opened by Protestant Dissenters in Southwark in 1687 or 1688.

A movement arose in London in the last years of the seventeenth century for founding schools for the poor. In 1705 there were in London 56 schools for the poor, with 2,200 scholars. It will be readily understood that the parents, being in a state of gross ignorance themselves and expecting their children to earn a pittance at a very early age, would not use the privileges offered unless something more tangible than education was added. We find, therefore, that the children were clothed and in some cases partially fed at the expense of the founders of the schools.

The development of education aroused the attention of Sir John Cass. He supported the St. Botolph Aldgate School, and took an active part in its management. In a few years it became apparent that another school was required in the populous parish of Aldgate. In 1709 Sir John Cass offered to build a school more centrally situated for the children of the "Freedom" part of the parish, *i.e.*, the Ward of Portsoken. The parish authorities assigned to Sir John Cass a piece of land to the south of the old St. Botolph Church, and the school was erected and opened in 1710. The con-

temporary description of the school building is interesting reading in the light of present-day school requirements: "John Cass was minded at his own charge to erect divers shops and buildings, and also to erect a Free School over the shops, and a Burial Vault underneath the said shops for the benefit of the Ward of Portsoken . . . and the upper rooms to be used for a School for the education of the Poor Children of the Ward of Portsoken in such manner as by the said John Cass should be appointed, and should pay the Master and Mistress of the same £20 per annum, and the Profits by Burials in the Vault under the Shops should be applied for the better endowment of the School."

The new school was opened with considerable ceremony. A sermon was preached by the Archbishop of York, and the service was attended by sixteen peers and forty members of the House of Commons.

THE ENDOWMENT OF THE SCHOOL.—Sir John Cass left two wills, one made in 1709 and fully executed, another, dated 1718, on five sheets, only two of which were effectively signed. By the earlier will he expressed his intention to build a school in Aldgate for the benefit of poor children, "to instruct 50 boys in Reading, Writing and Arithmetic, and 40 girls to write and cast accounts and to read and learn plain sewing. He bequeathed the master £6 for mourning, to each boy 20s. for mourning." By the incomplete will Sir John gave £150 per annum to support the School, "to pay the Master £40 per annum, the Mistress £30 per annum, further 12 sacks of coal apiece, also to provide decent blue clothing for the boys and girls. . . . Also to provide the said 90 children daily with dinner."

Lady Cass maintained the School from 1718 till 1732, after which the school struggled on till 1738, when from lack of funds it was closed. A suit in Chancery was instituted by friends of the School, and a scheme was obtained in 1748 making the provisions contemplated in the Second Will effective, and the School was forthwith re-opened.

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The following objects of interest were shown:—

(1) THE SCHOOL MACE.—The silver mace is a model of the Tower of Old St. Botolph Aldgate Church, which was demolished in 1744. In January, 1758, "Mr. Robert Harley offered to the Trustees a Silver-headed Staff, on which was a representation of St. Botolph, Aldgate, and which had heretofore been used at the Cockneys' Feasts formerly held in the same Parish and is supposed to have been the gift of Sir John Cass to the Cockneys' Society." (Minute Book.)

(2) SIR JOHN CASS'S SNUFF BOX.—At a Trustees' meeting in February, 1755, "Mr. Robert Bridgman made a present to the trust for the use of Sir Crisp Gascoyne, the Treasurer, and his successors, a Silver Tobacco Box in a shagreen case which was formerly the property of Sir John Cass." (Minute Book.)

(3) THE BADGE OF BLOCK TIN WORN BY THE SCHOLARS IN 1749.—One of these is now in the Guildhall Museum, another was recently found several feet underground in Austin Friars, and is now in possession of the School authorities.

(4) A PEWTER MEMORIAL TABLET.—In November, 1779, Mr. Wyatt "informed the Trustees that a Pewter Memorial Tablet of 12 inches square and  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch thick had been discovered on the reparation of the old School . . . on which there appears the following inscription:

" " In ye year of our Lord one  
Thousand seven hundred  
and Ten, and in ye ninth year  
of ye reign of our gracious  
soveraign Lady Queen Anne."

“ John Cass, Esq., born in this Ward of Portsoken, did in his lifetime at his own Cost and Charges erect this Schoole and Bountifully endowed the same for ye education of ye Poor Children born in this Ward, that they might be early instructed in ye knowledge of ye true religion according to ye principles and practice of the Church of England.—Ex dono John Silk.”

(5) STATUE OF SIR JOHN CASS.—At entrance in Jewry Street, by Roubilliac, 1751.

(6) SEVERAL PICTURES, formerly belonging to Sir John Cass.

(7) THE PORTRAIT OF SIR JOHN CASS IN ARMOUR, painted 1754, thirty-six years after his death.

(8) A WRITING BOOK, in which annually, from 1788 till 1836, the best writer in the School copied two pages as a specimen of penmanship.

(9) SILVER-GILT LOVING CUP.—Presented by Will by Jeremy Bentham in 1794. Bentham had acted as Receiver (treasurer) to the Foundation for upwards of sixty years.