

William Gardiner's 'Recollections of Old Leicester'

J. D. Bennett

William Gardiner (1770-1853), hosiery manufacturer, author and composer, is remembered now for his three volume, gossipy

set of local memoirs, *Music and Friends*, and as the man who introduced the music of Beethoven into England. (1) For many years he was a leading figure in the cultural life of Leicester, and in 1835 was a founder-member of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society.

One of the lectures Gardiner gave to the Society was called 'Recollections of Old Leicester'. It was delivered on 23rd December 1844, and although not printed in the Society's Transactions, was published in the *Leicester Journal* the following month, where it has lain forgotten ever since. (2) Perhaps not surprisingly, it drew on material from the first two volumes of *Music and Friends*, which had appeared in 1838; interestingly, it also included details which were contained in the third volume, which was not published till 1853.

William Gardiner's Leicester:

When he was two, William Gardiner was sent to Mrs Loseby's dame school in High Street, and then to Henry Carrick's day school ('academy') in Silver Street. He was present at the Grand Music Meeting at St Martin's Church in 1774, held for the benefit of the new Leicester Infirmary, and later was to help organise the Leicester Music Festival at St Margaret's Church in 1827. For many years the Gardiners' hosiery business was in Bath Lane, and later in Newarke Street. The Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, of which Gardiner was a leading member, met at various places in the town, including the Midland Counties Fire Office in Welford Place, the Amphitheatre in Humberstone Gate, the Exchange in the Market Place, and the Guildhall, before coming to rest at the newly opened Museum in New Walk in 1849. For some years he shared a house on the south side of High Street (what became no. 90, between Carts Lane and Highcross Street) with his sister, Sophia. A lifelong member of Great Meeting in East Bond Street, Gardiner died in 1853 and was buried in the new

Welford Road Cemetery. After his death, Sophia Gardiner moved to Tower Street, and spent her last years there; she died in 1864 and was buried with her brother.



William Gardiner.

Recollections of Old Leicester by William Gardiner:

'... What I propose, is to give some account of the state of society in this town as far back as I can recollect; and as in conversations with my father, I have heard him recount many things which happened before my time. I shall make free to incorporate these with my own thoughts ...

'The vacant ground that lies between the High Street and Sanvey Gate, bounded by the Highcross Street, and the wall by the side of the ditch, now called Church Gate; I say, within these confines, is a vast square that was covered with churches and monasteries. At the demolition of

religious houses, large spaces were thrown open, and converted into gardens. These were enclosed by mud walls, which formed what were called the back lanes, frightful alleys, without a house ... On pulling down the Town Gaol, it was discovered that one side of the kitchen was formed on the remains of St Peter's Church, the site of which was not known before. (3) At this time, bricks had not been used; as we do not find any building of that material much older than the Great Meeting, erected in 1708. The dwellings were entirely made of framed timber, with their gable ends next the street. The only stone house was Lord Hastings', in the High Street. One turret now remains, which I remember being cased with brick. (4) The water for domestic purposes was supplied by draw wells, and severe enactments were passed by the Corporation against washerwomen cleansing linen at these wells. Afterwards, pumps were furnished to all the principal streets, which were then considered a safeguard against fire. ...

'The first coach was started by Mr Nedham, who built his house, at the east end of St Martin's Church (5) ... It was drawn by four heavy, long tailed black horses; started on the Monday morning, arrived in London on the Wednesday, and

returned on Saturday evening to Leicester. In the *Leicester Journal*, 1774, a person advertises for a partner in a chaise to London; and another wishes to engage only a third part of a seat, and as a recommendation speaks of himself as a light and slim person. When I went to town to the commemoration of Handel, we started at four o'clock in the morning by the Leicester fly, and we passed Saint Paul's as the clock was striking twelve at night. (6) ... The slow rate of travelling made the coaches an easy prey to highwaymen; Woburn and Birstall Sands were dreaded. These gentry learnt at the coach-offices when the inside was stored with a booty worth taking. I find in the *Leicester Journal*, 4th June 1774, the Derby coach, with six insides, was robbed of their watches and money at Oadby town end, and the Nottingham coach, near the Spittal House, the same night. (7) ...

'The increasing size of Leicester, within the last fifty years, has scarcely been exceeded by any town in the kingdom. (8) I remember when there was but one house a hundred yards beyond the Three Crowns – a thatched cottage – the Jolly Miller – agreeably shaded with a cluster of tall trees, and beside it a pond of water, in which the postboys washed their horses. (9) In front of the Horse Fair (leading from the Crowns to the South Gate) there was a large garden, in which stood the Recorder's House, which house now finds itself placed on one side of Belvoir Street. (10) In the front of this was Phipps' field, a fine piece of grass (although afterwards a cornfield) which extended to the present race course. (11) During the American war, I recollect the French prisoners had this field as a play ground, and on a Sunday afternoon crowds of spectators were present to witness their gambols. (12) ...

'I have heard my father say, he remembers the Church Gate being literally the town ditch; the mid-way being so much below the side pavement, that an active person might have jumped over a full loaded wagon. The Abbey was close on the high road ... This monastery has been rendered famous, as the last residence of Cardinal Wolsey ... The Cardinal was buried in the Chapel, the floor of which is now converted into a flower garden. I just remember some fragments of the windows, the only part of the Abbey then remaining. The present ruins are the remains of the private residence of the Devonshire family, who lived here in great splendour ... I remember being present when a digging was set on foot to find the Cardinal's bones.

'In 1774, the town gates were taken down, and the walls allowed to be built upon. The large High Cross was removed from the principal street, and a single column, which originally formed a part of that building, was left in its place. This also has been wisely removed. (13) ... An important epoch was the navigation being extended from Loughborough to Leicester. Before this time, the coal was brought upon the backs of horses and asses, from the pits at Coleorton ... Soon as we began to be supplied with coal by

the navigation, the pit owners in Derbyshire tempted Sir George Beaumont, by a large sum, to shut up his pits at Coleorton, and for more than twenty years the old supply was cut off. The invention of railroads, however, has at once destroyed this compact, and the Swannington Railroad has lowered the price one-third, has extended the manufactory, and greatly added to the comforts of the poor. (14) The invention of the notched wheel by William Dawson, a stocking-maker, who lived in the Horsepool Street, has been the means of introducing entirely new descriptions of work into the manufactory, by this simple contrivance. (15) ...

'The whole of the houses from the North Gate to the South Gate, and from the East Gate to the West, were entirely built of wood. The town wall ran from the South Gate to the corner where stands the Lion and Lamb; from thence by Gallowtree Gate, Church Gate, Sanvey Gate, to the river. (16) In the gardens of the better houses, now occupied by Dr Freer, Dr Shaw, Mr Burnaby, Mr Nedharn, &c are to be seen the mulberry trees, planted by Act of Parliament, in Charles's reign, with the intent of cultivating our own silk. (17) ...

'The Shambles was a large old building at the bottom of Shambles Lane, which was, some hundred years afterwards, converted into Green Coat School. (18) All the principal inns and roads were on the outside of the eastern wall ... An unsightly building, for the sale of butchers' meat, ran from the White Lion to the Conduit, which remained for many years, till the good taste of the inhabitants removed it. (19) At that time there was another building, called the Gainsborough, the lower part of which was a prison, perhaps situated where the Exchange now stands. (20) At this time there might be three drapers' shops in the Market Place. I remember Mr Bentley's and Samuel Matthews'. The window places were quite open without any glass; the shutter was contrived to fall down like a shelf, upon which the tammy and linsey-woolseys were exposed for sale. (21) Thomas Simpson, the celebrated self-taught mathematician and F.R.S., was a weaver of this home-spun. (22) ... In the White Apron Fair, held between the Cross and the Southgates, I remember scores of women sitting on chairs, with their home-spun linen on their knees, to accommodate the less wealthy customers. ... In 1788, Richard Phillips, a schoolmaster, settled in Leicester, and ... formed a Philosophical Society, called the Adelphi. (23) Of this brotherhood I was a member ... We numbered at last seventeen members; but the French Revolution breaking out in 1789, we were called upon to discontinue our meetings, lest politics should creep in to our discussions ... Of distant impressions, none are so strong in my recollection as the great Music Meeting on the opening of St Martin's organ, in 1774, when I was four years and a half old ... When the music ceased, the eyes of the congregation were fixed on a black man in a singular dress. It was ... Omai, just brought from the Sandwich Islands by Captain Cook. He stood up in wild amazement at what was going on, for he was brought

down to see what effect this grand crash of sounds would have upon him ...

‘The most important [musical] society was St Margaret’s Catch Club, formed of the singers of that church, and those of the Great Meeting, who dined together, with the heads of the town, once a year. At these jovial meetings, rounds and catches were performed, as being full of mirth and hilarity. It is stated in 1774, ‘there will be a concert, gratis, at the Assembly Rooms, at eleven o’clock, after which the company will adjourn to the Three Cranes, to dine at two’. (24) ... ‘We never had a regular built theatre in this town. There was an old building in Millstone Lane, called the play-house, which afterwards took the name of the Tabernacle; and I remember seeing John Wesley, with his white ringlets hanging down his back, going to preach his first sermon there. (25) Afterwards a modern chapel was built on the spot. About the year 1770, plays formed a delightful and fashionable amusement in the county. ... I see by the *Leicester Journal*, that the Kembles and Siddons, in their early career, visited Leicester ... long before they became eminent on the London stage. (26) ...

‘In my father’s time, there were only two carriages kept in Leicester: Mr Lewis, the principal hosier, and the Recorder, Wright’s. (27) There were no carts or waggons; everything was conveyed on the backs of horses. It was common to see a string of bell horses at a manufacturer’s door, waiting to be loaded for all parts of the kingdom. (28) Those who did not aspire to keep a carriage, kept a double horse - a strong steady animal, with a pillion behind the saddle, for ladies; and for mounting, horse blocks were placed in different parts of the town ...

‘Dancing, sixty years ago, seems to have been almost the only entertainment in Leicester, and kept up with such spirit, that never less than twelve subscription assemblies took place in the year. What gave such *éclat* to this accomplishment, was the eminent teacher, Mr Frudd, who I well knew ... (29) He taught every week at Mrs Linwood’s, and Miss Peppin and Ayscough’s, and other ladies, were admitted to his lectures in their houses. (30) In 1774, is advertised Mr Frudd’s ball, to begin at half-past four, soon as tea was over in the afternoon ... In the same paper is another instance of these primitive times, Mr Winstanley, the sheriff, will give a ball, to begin at six o’clock, and ladies and gentlemen may have tickets by sending to Mr Gregory for them. (31) ...

‘During the American war, when the French prisoners were here, they introduced the manly exercise of skating, and the constant frosts, the thermometer often being below zero, drew out every one that could raise a pair of skates, to attempt the same. In February 1784, a pantomimic masquerade was performed by thirty or forty skaters on the ice, between the West Bridge and Vauxhall ... Thousands of gazers were present upon the banks, enjoying the sight. (32)

‘The dog days were insupportable, by their excessive heat. All handicraft business in the middle of the day, for two or three hours, was suspended, and the thermometer rose to what would be called a West Indian heat. Then the corn was well ripened, and got in without those mishaps that attend a rainy season; but the moist weather of late years, though detrimental to corn, has been highly succulent to the gardens. When I was young, comparatively, there was no garden stuff. Tons of vegetables are brought into the town now, where none were offered for sale before. My grandfather remembered the first potatoes that were brought to the Cross. (33) The people bit them, and spit them out again. No one would buy; the man gave them away, and said he would come back with a supply in a fortnight. Customers he had in abundance. This is not much further back than the beginning of the last century. What would we have done without them? The poor must have famished ...

‘The Free School ... formerly was well conducted. The High School was taught by the Rev Mr Pigott; the Middle School by the Rev Daws Ross; and the Low School by the Rev William Bickerstaff. (34) It was then a valuable institution for the education of the sons of freemen. I have heard my father say, he recollected the old Lord Stamford, and his brother, the Hon Booth Grey, as boys, coming every morning to the upper school from Steward’s Hay. (35) The Mayor and Corporation appointed the masters, and judged of the scholars’ progress. The boys had used to make their speeches in Latin and Greek, at the Cross, before the Body Corporate, but how they were rewarded, I do not recollect. The lower schools had hot buns given to them in the porch, at seven o’clock in the morning; and once a year was a supper, called a potation, for the lower masters, who invited their friends, at which there were plenty of libations of punch and ale. ...

‘In poetry ... we had a pre-eminent genius of the name of Rozzel. (36) He ... was a stocking-maker. The Revolution Club established by the Messrs Woods, in conjunction with the Whig gentry of the county, honored Rozzel with the title of Poet Laureate to their Society, and every 4th of November he produced an Ode upon Liberty, and the excellence of our Constitution as established in 1688. (37) Some thirty years afterwards, Mr Combe, the printer of the *Leicester Chronicle* (set up by Mr Ruding, of Westcotes) became the champion of liberty, and wrote many songs. (38)

‘In this desultory manner have I brought before you, what I have seen and known of my native town ... On looking back, I am inclined to say, that in the middle rank in which I have been brought up, that we live more rationally, and have greater enjoyments than our forefathers. They no doubt, had more solid beef and pudding, and more leisure, than us, but they had not a tythe of our luxuries, and knew nothing of the pleasures we derive from books and science, and a thousand other things, which a refined state of society affords ...



View of Leicester from the Canal looking towards St Mary de Castro, 1795. From John Nichols, *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, vol. I, part II, plate XXIV, page 303.

Notes:

1. For an account of his life and work, see Jonathan Wilshere, *William Gardiner of Leicester (1770-1853): hosiery manufacturer, musician and dilettante*, (1970).
2. *Leicester Journal*. 3rd, 10th and 17th January 1845.
3. The remains found when the Old Borough Gaol was demolished in 1792 are usually thought to be those of St John's Hospital.
4. The Huntingdon Tower, demolished in 1902.
5. It was started by Richard Nedham in March 1760, and ran from Nottingham to London, via Loughborough, Leicester and Market Harborough.
6. In May 1791.
7. The Spittal House was an almshouse at the end of Belgrave Gate.
8. The population of Leicester was 16,953 in 1801; by 1841 it was 50,853, with 12,137 houses and another 300 in course of erection.
9. The Three Crowns, at the corner of Horsefair Street and Granby Street, was demolished in 1867; the Jolly Miller disappears from directories after 1822.
10. The Recorder's House was on the north side of Belvoir Street.
11. Phipps' field was so called because it was rented by Alderman Thomas Phipps, who was mayor of Leicester in 1749; 'the present race course' is now Victoria Park.
12. The American War of Independence, 1775-1783.
13. The column was removed in 1836 to the Crescent in King Street; from there it went to Highcross House in Gwendolen Road c.1923; to the Newarke Houses in 1954; and to its present location in Cheapside in 1977.
14. The Leicester Navigation was opened in 1794; the Leicester & Swannington Railway was inaugurated in 1832.
15. The use of Dawson's wheel, invented in 1791, greatly improved the manufacture of fancy hosiery. Horsepool Street is the present Oxford Street.
16. The Lion & Lamb in Gallowtree Gate was pulled down c.1878 to improve access to the Market Place.
17. Dr John Freer lived in Southgate Street; Dr George Shaw in New Street; Beaumont Burnaby in Friar Lane; and John Nedham in Belgrave Gate.
18. The Greencoat School (Alderman Newton's), near St Nicholas' Church, opened about 1785 in the old shambles, where the butchers had once sold their meat. Shambles Lane was later called Applegate Street.
19. The White Lion was in the Market Place; the Conduit, a source of water for many citizens, was in Cheapside.
20. The Gainsborough – the origin of the name is unknown – a combined market hall and prison, was replaced by the New

Gainsborough in 1748. This is the building Gardiner refers to as the Exchange, which in turn was replaced by the present Corn Exchange in the 1850s.

21. Tammy was a fine worsted cloth; linsey-woolsey was a coarse mixture of wool and flax.
22. Thomas Simpson (1710-1761), the 'Bosworth prodigy', who found fame through his mathematical treatises.
23. Sir Richard Phillips (1767-1840), author, bookseller, publisher and founder of the short-lived *Leicester Herald* (1792). The Adelphi Society, which met in Phillips' schoolroom in Bond Street, was suppressed in 1793, when he was sent to prison for selling Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*.
24. The Assembly Rooms were approximately on the site of the Clock Tower; the Three Cranes, one of the town's leading inns, was in Gallowtree Gate.
25. No reference to a theatre in Millstone Lane has been found. John Wesley preached in the Tabernacle, a former barn, on a number of occasions in the 1770s and 1780s. The building, at the Southgate Street end of Millstone Lane, was taken down in 1787, and replaced by a purpose-built chapel, in turn largely replaced by Bishop Street Methodist Chapel in 1815.
26. John Philip Kemble visited Leicester in 1776; his sister, Sarah Siddons, and her husband, William, were here in 1774 and 1778.
27. William Lewis, of Highcross Street. Sir Nathan Wright was Recorder of Leicester, 1680-84. He died in 1721, and as Gardiner's father was not born till 1743, he may be confusing him with George Wright, Sir Nathan's grandson, who was M.P. for Leicester, 1727-65.
28. Bell horses are probably packhorses, which had bells on their harness.
29. Mr Frudd, of Nottingham, was a violinist and dancing master.
30. Mrs Hannah Linwood, mother of the celebrated needlework artist Mary Linwood, ran a boarding school for young ladies in Belgrave Gate; Misses Peppin and Ayscough had one in High Street.
31. Clement Winstanley (d.1808) of Braunstone Hall was High Sheriff of Leicestershire in 1774; John Gregory (1727-1789) was proprietor and printer of the *Leicester Journal*.
32. This took place on 2nd February 1784. The Bath Gardens, or Vauxhall Gardens, near the West Bridge, were a place of outdoor amusement, with illuminations, fireworks, concerts, plays etc. They closed in 1797.
33. The High Cross, where fruit, vegetables, and other produce were sold by country people at the Wednesday Market.
34. The Rev James Pigott was headmaster of the Free Grammar School in Highcross Street, Rev John Dawes Ross the usher, and Rev William Bickerstaff the under-usher.
35. An old shooting lodge, Steward's Hay, near Groby, was incorporated in the now-demolished Bradgate House in 1856.
36. Charles Rozzel(l) (1754-1792) was the champion of the framework-knitters.
37. The Revolution Club, formed in 1782 to promote political progress and parliamentary reform, was named after the English Revolution of 1688; 4th November was the anniversary of William III's birth, which they celebrated with a dinner at the Lion & Lamb and other inns. The Messrs Woods were probably Henry and Thomas Wood, leading hosiers. The club ceased to meet after 1792.
38. Thomas Combe, bookseller and printer, of Hotel Street. Walter Ruding of Westcotes Hall was the chief proprietor of the *Leicester Chronicle* which started in 1810.