

BARING-GOULD'S YORKSHIRE - 1864-1871

A Visit to Knaresborough, North Yorkshire

Those not familiar with Yorkshire may be forgiven for thinking that it is wholly industrial and dominated by dark satanic mills. In reality there are many beautiful and hidden places only a few miles from the major centres of industry. Such a place is the historic market town of Knaresborough situated on the River Nidd, close to Harrogate, Ripon and York.

Visitors may row or punt on the river, climb the steep steps to the 14th century ruined castle demolished by the Roundheads and look down on the Victorian stone railway bridge which spans the river, providing a wonderful backdrop for photographs. Perhaps listen to a brass band, then walk through well-kept gardens to the ancient market place (1) and discover 'The Oldest Chymist Shoppe in England'. After taking refreshment in one of the many tashops, visit the 14th century courthouse, Parish Church and wooded riverside picnic areas. See the famous dropping well where personal and household items are petrified whilst suspended beneath a curtain of water rich in minerals. Visit the eerie wishing well and cave where the prophetess Mother Shipton is reputed to have been born in 1488. Her prophesies were first published in 1663 but suffered from forgery in Victorian times.

Beyond the Low Bridge along Abbey Road, is a rare medieval wayside shrine known as 'The Chapel of our Lady of the Crag'. Also known as St. Robert's Chapel (2) it was excavated under licence in 1408 and was later adorned with a strange sworded figure of a knight which guards its entrance. Visits can be made by prior arrangement.

Beside the chapel is a dwelling hewn out of the same lofty limestone cliff face by the Hill family in the late 1700's. Its military appearance and associations with a Duchess attracted the name Fort Montagu. Locally known as 'The House in The Rock' it is owned by Anplcforth College and has been occupied by (the same family for five generations. It is open to visitors during the summer (3). A mile or so down river, beyond what was once the site of a Trinitarian Priory, is the cave once occupied by Robert Flower (St. Robert) a 13th century hermit and healer. His empty tomb and the foundations of a chapel are adjacent. The hermitage became infamous in 1759 when Eugene Aram, a schoolmaster, was convicted of murdering one Daniel Clark whose body had remained buried inside the cave since his murder in 1745. The crime was only detected when Aram's accomplice eventually turned Kings evidence. On conviction at York Assizes Aram was transported to Knaresborough where he was hung in chains.

Sabine's earliest literary link with the town appears to have been in Blind Jack of Knaresborough. This popular character known as John "Blind Jack" Metcalf (1717-1910) was blinded as a child after contracting smallpox. A lively character, he became a military musician, joined the hunt and engaged in other manly pursuits. After running off with another man's 'wife to be' the night before the wedding, he subsequently became a successful builder of bridges and roads! The story, with 36 others, was published in Yorkshire Oddities, Incidents and strange Events (4) in 1874, which after re-issue in abridged form in 1987, went on to become a best selling Yorkshire title.

In Sabine's hagiography, *The Lives of the Saints* (5), published between 1872-7, there is a detailed 10 page biography of St. Robert of Knaresborough, which contains interesting local references. Sabine comments that although St. Robert was made a saint within 20 years of his death, he believes he was never canonized.

St. Robert and the caves also find a place in Sabine's *Cliff Castles and Cave Dwellings of Europe* (6). The latter being an historical account of refuges, castles, robbers' dens and sepulchres found in Europe.

As we know, Sabine always had 'an eye' for unusual characters and events, and during his stay of over seven years in Yorkshire he discovered both! Knaresborough and its people clearly appealed to him, but whether he actually visited to investigate first-hand, or merely relied upon the accounts of others is not clear. Assuming that he did visit, perhaps by train, one could imagine him leaving Grace and the children to amuse themselves in the bustling ancient market place or playing down by the river whilst he investigated. On second thoughts, he probably strode out on the 24-mile return journey from Dalton and left them at home!

Next time you are in Yorkshire I can recommend a visit to Knaresborough (7). If you are able to pre-read Sabine's articles on the Town first (and hopefully discover further articles), then so much the better! For those of you like my wife Sylvia and myself, who are fortunate enough to be regular visitors to the town, I hope you have found something of interest in this article.

Keith Lister,

Yorkshire Representative of SBGAS (1) Market held on Wednesdays.

(2) Open by prior arrangement. Enquiries to (7) below.

(3) Closed for renovation from 1995. Enquiries to (6) below. (4) Yorkshire Oddities and Strange Events. Hodges 1874 P.120-171. (Smith Settle reprint 1997 p.RS-112).

(5) Lives of The Saints. New Edition 1999 Vol. I Or.364-373.

(6) Cliff Castles and Cave Dwellings of Europe, Scully & Co. 1911. p.220/1.

(7) Tourist Information Tel: Knaresborough 01423-866-881 (Sunrise) or Harrogate 01423-525-666 (all year)