

ROGER LUXTON (1813 -1892) THE 'SONG-MAN'

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The genealogist often experiences difficulty in ferreting out colourful "particulars about the lives he researches and he has to content himself with bare facts. Once in a while he strikes lucky and can enrich his portrait with a more graphic account. For me one such character was Roger Luxton, the songman who in his old age lived at picturesque Croft Farm, Halwell, North Devon.

The usual details established from parish registers and census returns hinted only at the banality of Roger's life as an agricultural labourer in 19th century Devon. It was only when Norah Luxton in Newton Abbot sent me a reference to him contained in the Burnet Morris Index at Exeter that I began to find him interesting. The reference read "Roger Luxton c 1814, Croft Farm, Halwell "Song-man" (Baring-Gould "Old Country Life" Ed. 1890 Page 225)". Intrigued to learn more I asked Norah to consult Baring-Gould's book for an account. At Christmas 1995 Norah kindly forwarded a copy of S. Baring-Gould's interview with the songman a hundred years ago.

Baring-Gould in his Old Country Life (published by Methuen 1895) page 275 presents a fascinating pen portrait of the Song-man who, he tells us, was once very famous for the ballads he sang at shearing haysel and harvest feasts. Roger, it seems, was a disgruntled old man when the clergyman met him but he gave an interesting explanation of why his ballads were out of fashion. The account, which is reported in the quaint Devon dialect used by the song-man provides a more authentic flavour to the story. Baring-Gould writes:- "At Halwell in north Devon, lives a fine old man named Roger Luxton, aged 76, a great-grandfather with bright eyes and an intelligent face. He stays about his grandchildren but

is usually found at the picturesque farmhouse of a daughter at Halwell called Croft. This old man was once very famous as a song-man but his memory fails him as to a good number of the ballads he was wont to sing. "Ah, your honour", said he, "in old times us used to be welcome in every farmhouse at all shearing and haysel and harvest feasts; but bless'y! now the farmers do `ten all learn the piany and zing nort but twittery sort of peeces that have nother music nor sense in them and they don't care to hear us and any decent sort of music. And there be now no more shearing and haysel and harvest feasts. All them things be given up. `Tain't the same world as used to be 'tain't so cheerful. Folks don't zing over their work and laugh after it. There be no dances for the youngsters as there used to was. The farmers be too grand to care to talk to us old chaps and for certain don't care to hear us zing.

Why for nigh on forty years us old zinging fellows have been drove to the public houses to zing, and to a different quality of hearers too. And now I reckon the labouring folk be so tree-mendious edicated that they don't care to hear our old songs nother. 'Tis all "Pop goes the weasel" and "Eleven on the Rhine" now. I reckon folks now have got different ears from what they used to have and different hearts too. More's the pity." Norah Luxton consulted

two further books, "Songs of the West" by S. Baring-Gould and Fleetwood Sheppard (Methuen 1895) and "Songs of the West", new revised edition by S. Baring-Gould and F.W. Bussell (Methuen n.d.). These books contain four melodies and songs provided by Roger Luxton but Baring-Gould confesses to altering the words which he considered too bawdy.

"Plymouth Sound". Melody to a song of this name taken down from Roger Luxton. Baring-Gould thought the "original words not only very poor but somewhat coarse and undesirable" so he wrote new words.

"Furze Bloom". Melody taken down from Roger Luxton of Halwell to the words of the ballad "Gosport Beach". Baring-Gould considered the original words "could not possibly be inserted here" so wrote new words and seemingly a new title.

"The Blue Flame". Roger Luxton and others sang it. Baring-Gould believed "the words are objectionable" so wrote new ones. "This blue flame" is interesting. It was a common belief in the West of England that a soul after death appears as a blue flame; also that a blue flame comes from the churchyard to the house of the one doomed to die and hovers on the doorstep till the death-doomed expires, when the soul of the deceased is seen returning with the other flame, also as a flame, to the churchyard.

"Constant Johnny". The words and melody taken down from Roger Luxton of Halwell. It was in duet form, such lovers' duets being common in folk song. It seems to be based on a ballad written circa 1680.

"Charming Molly I do love thee / There's none other I adore Pierced by your beauteous eyes / My heart transfixed lies Say dearest Molly you'll be mine for evermore."

In the next verse she rejects him but then in the final verse they unite.

As a genealogist and historian of the Luxtons I can identify the song-man and add details concerning his life. Roger is a rare Christian name in the family but I knew that it was used in a branch living at Bratton Clovelly. I consulted a tree I had compiled and soon identified the songman as an agricultural labourer who, in the mid 19th century, lived at Broxcombe. Bratton Clovelly, about four miles distant from Croft Farm Halwell, where Baring-Gould met him.

Roger Kerslake Luxton, the sixth of nine children born to James Luxton and his wife Agnes Kerslake, was baptised at Bratton Clovelly on the 16 April 1813. Roger's ancestry can be traced back to his three times great grandparents, John Luxton and Wilmott Hatherley, who married at Iddesleigh, Devon on the 12 February 1688. His father, James Luxton baptised at Highampton, Devon on the 16 June 1774, was settled at Northlew where he married Agnes Kerslake on the 20 May 1798. Four of their children were baptised at Northlew before the family moved to Bratton Clovelly where Roger was born. Roger married Susanna Northcott at Bratton Clovelly on the 26 April 1833 and the young couple both signed the marriage register with their mark. In 1841 Roger, an agricultural labourer, lived in the parish with his growing family at Broxcombe and the couple had ten children born at Bratton Clovelly beginning with John on the 9 September 1833 followed by Ann 1835, Grace 1837, Henry C. 1838, Dinah 1840, twins Joanna and Agnes 1843, Susan 1847 and ending with twins Ellen and Betsey in 1853. Roger and his family were still residing at Broxcombe in 1861.

Susan Luxton, Broxcombe, was buried at Bratton Clovelly on the 1 February 1879, aged 66 years, but this entry in the burial register conflicts with her monumental inscription in the churchyard which records "Susanna, wife of Roger Luxton of this parish died January 27, 1880 aged 66 years." In the 1881 census, Roger a 66 year old widower, caretaker and agricultural labourer was living in the nearby village of Germansweek. When interviewed by Baring-Gould about 1889, Roger, aged 76, was living with a married daughter at Croft Farm, Halwell about four miles from Broxcombe.

Roger Luxton, described as a farmer aged 77, died from "pneumonia 17 days and old age" at Croft Farm, Halwell on the 23 January 1892. J. Box, his grandson, was in attendance when he died.

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