

## Robert Blakey Part 2

by Roger Hawkins

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I did not know Thomas Bewick until within the last ten years of his life. He was then an interesting-looking old man, of portly size, and of a good-humoured and social temperament. He frequented, on certain evenings, a sort of club-room at the Fox and Lamb at the foot of Pilgrim Street, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and many happy and pleasant hours he spent with a few select, intelligent, and jocular friends, who congregated here, chiefly with a view to enjoy his company and conversation. He was fond of porter, and I have known him sit from seven o'clock in the evening till eleven, sipping his favourite beverage to the tune of five or six pints. It did not seem to produce any muddling or stupefying effect upon him whatever. He was always clear, collected, humorous, and pleasant. Custom, I have no doubt, had rendered this indulgence quite innoxious both to his body and mind.

It was chiefly at the Fox and Lamb that I met him, though I had enjoyed three or four private interviews with him at the residence of a mutual friend. I took notes of his conversation at the time, and have ever since preserved them with a degree of fond recollection of the worthy old engraver.

Bewick was not what may be called a vain man of his great fame and acquirements, for pride he had none. Still, he loved to dwell with cheerful complacency upon his own exploits, and upon subjects closely connected with them. He used to observe often, particularly to any new acquaintance, that if a letter simply directed to "Thomas Bewick, Engraver," were to be forwarded by post from any civilised part of the globe, it would be sure to find its way, in perfect safety, to Newcastle-upon-Tyne. This experiment was, perhaps, never tried; but I have no doubt that if it had it would have fully confirmed the artist's conjecture.

He could not be considered a learned man, but he possessed a more than usual share of common sense; and this generally conducted him to safe and judicious conclusions on most subjects in which he felt any interest. He was a keen observer of the world, yet his shrewdness was entirely devoid of cunning and ill-nature.

Bewick often dwelt upon his trip to London, "I was," said he, "quite overpowered by the coldness and selfishness of everything I witnessed. In every direction there was a hurry-scurry; and all the softer and more amiable feelings of man's nature seemed to me to be obliterated from the scene. I felt my personal pride humbled. I was nothing in the great mass of moving humanity. The whole affair was contrary to everything I had felt or thought of previously. I never saw a single recognition of acquaintanceship or friendship in the streets; every single unit of humanity was moving in rapid succession, as if it had no connection with anything around it. How different from what I had all my life been accustomed to! Why, in Newcastle, I could not get from my own door to Mr. Charnley's shop in Bigg Market without having twenty enquiries made, by friends in my route, about my health and comfort of my household. But in London life is cheap; the hearts of even good men get hardened and that mutual regard and sympathy, which are the real balsams of life, are seldom tasted. I was delighted beyond measure when I turned my back on the place."

I have often thought that Bewick had a prophetic anticipation of the almost universal use of wood-engraving since his day; for I well remember that on one of his evening parties the conversation turned on his own profession, and he stoutly maintained, against an ingenious opponent, that not many years would pass over until the art would be almost indefinitely extended. His words still ring in my ears, "I feel quite certain that there is still room for great improvements in wood-engraving; and when sufficient encouragement is given for its more extended use greater nicety and skill will be displayed. We are only children yet in reference to many things, and wood-engraving among the rest."

### Notes and references

Thomas Bewick, 1753-1828, was a working engraver. He had little or nothing to do with Morpeth, but this recollection of him is from the *Memoirs of Robert Blakey*, edited by the Rev. Henry Miller, Trübner

(London, 1879). Much of Bewick's day-to-day work consisted of engraving on metal, but in his spare time he developed engraving on wood—previously a despised medium—into a branch of fine art.

Bewick's autobiography, *My Life*, was published in 1862. It has reappeared in various forms since, including a critical edition, ed. Iain Bain, Oxford University Press, 1975.

Dr. Robert Blakey, 1795-1878, was a Morpeth man. His reminiscences of Bewick are based on a personal acquaintance which lasted from about 1818 to the latter's death. He also left us a similar memoir of Bewick's most celebrated apprentice, Luke Clennel, with the difference that, in this case, his knowledge was mostly second-hand. Clennel had lived in Morpeth as a boy, so Blakey probably got his information from friends and members of the family.