

CONTRIBUTIONS :

A TOMBSTONE AND A PORTRAIT OF AN AGE¹⁶

Perhaps not everyone who reads this knows that the the north-west corner of Shandy Park stands the tombstone of John Barber Beaumont, or, if they do know, have been able to decipher what is written on it. The writer of this note acknowledges his debt to Hilda Szalagette who drew his attention to it.

John Barber Beaumont's memory is perpetuated in Beaumont Square, and I see that a new block of council homes in Bancroft Road is called Barber Beaumont House. Perhaps it is less well known that out of Barber Beaumont's New Philosophical Institute, set up shortly before he died in 1841, sprang the People's Palace and East London Technical Schools to which Queen Mary College is the heir.

Barber Beaumont spent £20,000 on the Eastern Athenæum, later the New Philosophical Institute, and endowed it to the extent of £300 per annum and established a trust fund of £13,000 to bring higher education and culture within the reach of people in East London. From 1841 to 1884 the Trustees kept the capital intact and applied the income to the New Philosophical Institute. The Institute was languishing for lack of proper financial support and it was in 1884 that Sir Edmund Hay Currie, the Chairman of the Trustees of the Beaumont Trust, wrote to the Drapers' Company offering to acquire the site of the Bancroft Hospital. It was from this point that the legacy of Barber Beaumont began to merge into the institution which older East Londoners will remember and which a greater number of people recognise as Queen Mary College.

The cemetery in which Barber Beaumont was originally buried was his own - Shandy Street being part of the Beaumont Mile End Estate. When this cemetery was closed his remains were transferred to Kensal Green cemetery.

There is no need for me to sketch in the story of Barber Beaumont's life and his achievements. His tombstone, alas crumbling and neglected, does it for me in the measured prose of his time:

WITHIN THIS VAULT ARE DEPOSITED THE MORTAL REMAINS OF
JOHN THOMAS BARBER BEAUMONT ESQUIRE F.A.S.F.G.S.
THE FOUNDER OF THIS CEMETERY
WHO DIED ON THE 15TH OF MAY 1841, IN THE 67TH YEAR OF HIS
AGE.

HE COMMENCED HIS CAREER IN LIFE AS AN ARTIST,
IN WHICH PROFESSION HIS ABILITY COMBINED WITH
SINGULAR INDUSTRY, ECONOMY AND PERSEVERANCE,
RAISED HIM TO A STATE OF HONOURABLE INDEPENDENCE
BUT AS HE BECAME AFFLUENT HE DID NOT BECOME IDLE
HIS CHARACTER ALWAYS INSTINCT WITH ENERGY LED HIM TO
PREFER A LIFE OF USEFUL ACTIVITY TO ONE OF INGLORIOUS EASE.
DURING THE ALARM OF FOREIGN INVASION IN THE LAST WAR
HE ORGANISED A CORPS
THE DUKE OF COMBERLAND'S SHARP SHOOTERS
OF WHICH HE BECAME MAJOR COMMANDANT AND IN WHICH HIS SKILL
AND COURAGE WERE EMINENTLY CONSPICUOUS.
TO IMPROVE THE CONDITION OF THE INGLORIOUS POOR WAS EVER
HIS MOST ANXIOUS CARE. FOR THIS PURPOSE HE INSTITUTED
THE FIRST SAVINGS BANK "THE PROVIDENT"
WHERE THE INDUSTRIOUS OPERATIVE MAY SECURELY DEPOSIT
HIS SAVINGS AND TURN THEM TO ACCOUNT.
THE COUNTY FIRE OFFICE AND THE PROVIDENT LIFE OFFICE
OWED THEIR ORIGIN AND THEIR SUCCESS
TO HIS WISE FORETHOUGHT,
HIS JUDICIOUS MANAGEMENT AND HIS INCESSANT TOIL.
IN THE LIST OF THOSE PATRIOTS AND PHILANTHROPISTS
WHO HAVE LABOURED TO PROMOTE
THE INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL WELL-BEING OF MAN
NO ONE WILL BE FOUND TO HAVE ACHIEVED A WORK BETTER
CALCULATED TO ACCOMPLISH THIS HIGH AND SACRED PURPOSE THAN
THE PHILOSOPHICAL INSTITUTION IN BEAUMONT SQUARE. /-

WHO THAT CONTEMPLATES THIS INSTITUTION WITH
ITS IMMEDIATE BENEFITS AND ITS MORE BENEFICIAL TENDENCIES
WILL NOT EXCLAIM WHEN HE PAUSES PENSIVE OVER
THE SEPULCHRE OF THE DEPARTED FOUNDER.
MAY THE FRUITS OF THIS GOOD WORK BE COETERNAL WITH HIS REWARD
AND MAY HIS EXAMPLE BE PROLIFIC OF SIMILAR GLORIOUS DEEDS,
TILL IGNORANCE, SUPERSTITION AND DEPRAVITY
SHALL VANISH FROM THE LAND.

MVS October 1978.

FLOODING ON THE ISLE OF DOGS.

On January 28th 1928, I and the rest of my family were awakened about 2 a.m. amidst considerable noise and bustle and packed off upstairs. The people living there were already awake and accommodated us children in their frontroom.

We had heard of high tides during the past few days and of water at overlapping the dock wall, but now it was really happening. The neighbours were hastily drilling holes in floorboards as water ran down the West Ferry Road and over the doorsteps. Some were nailing boards to their doorways but all to no avail. Carpets were rolled up and in the time available such items on floor level as could be retrieved were placed on top of beds and cupboards. The water came higher, everything smelling of oil as barrels from the Oil Wharf nearby floated past the door. I looked out of the upstairs window in the darkness - a table floated past the house with a cat perched on it. The water was now 3-4 feet deep.

As daylight broke, the water slowly began to go down carrying with it an enormous amount of rubbish from the factories and docks. This blocked the sewers as they became exposed and people with rubber boots or mended-up trousers tried hard to clear them. As the water receded from each house, under-floor water was baled out and buckets of tap water used to clear the offensive deposit. A fire tender did its best to clear the roads of slime - only one could be spared as others were in other parts of the land. Then came the great "clean-up" - all doors and windows were opened and many floor-boards lifted to allow the rooms and foundations to dry out. The whole place reeked like Venice on a hot day!

By noon, the "outside world" had heard of the disaster and help was beginning to arrive. The local policeman went round with a megaphone urging people to refrain from drinking tap-water as it was contaminated. In the early afternoon, horse-drawn water tankers arrived to supply drinking water. Hand-pumps and fire tenders from many districts arrived to pump out cements etc., whilst refuse carts, taken off their normal task, were used to clear the streets of rubbish, particularly piles of sodden books and clothing, and to sprinkle disinfectant in all the houses. Carpets, mattresses, bed-linen and clothing, were spread over fences, walls, lines, etc. to dry out. What a blessing it did not rain that day! Ultimately, the Council took away all mattresses and bed-linen for cleaning and disinfecting. Meanwhile, volunteers stationed themselves at various points along the River to watch for the next high tide, but fortunately there was no overflow.

Ten years later, the Island still talked of its flood and when houses were left closed for a time, the "waterlogged" smell still persisted. Even now, fifty years later, the oil marks can still be seen in some parts of the Island where the water reached its height.

AHF October 1978.

SNIPPETS

The National Museum of Labour History, at present at Limehouse but due to be moved to Mile End Baths, have produced their first pamphlet dealing with the Dublin Strike of 1913, it is available at 25p + 7p postage from the Museum, Limehouse Town Hall, Commercial Road E.14. The pamphlet was written by Terry McCarthy, the Museum's Curator.

A souvenir brochure accompanying the travelling Exhibition on the Forest's Centenary, reminds us that the forest once extended as far as "the bridge at Stratford, called the Bow". It is hard to imagine forests in this area today, but two Inn signs on Stratford High Street, the Green Man, and the Woodman, recall the days when locally grown timber was of importance, particularly in the building of ships.

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