

**Lorton**  
and its  
**Church**



A SHORT HISTORY  
WITH SOME  
LITERARY ASSOCIATIONS

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PRICE 2/-

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## *Lorton and its Church*

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It is the purpose of this little book to record something of the history of the Parish of Lorton and its Church, but before we proceed with that, it would be well to say a little about the valley in which they are situated.

“The Beautiful Vale of Lorton”—for so it was first described to the writer—lies between Cockermouth and Buttermere, the former being the birthplace of William Wordsworth who so loved the Valley. Perhaps the best approach is by way of the Whinlatter Pass, over which one must travel if entering it from the Keswick direction. After negotiating the wild surroundings of the Pass, where the road is flanked by the, as yet, new plantations, one is suddenly confronted with a wide and peaceful view of the Valley, stretching in a patchwork of fields and meadows, northward in the direction of the Solway Firth, and southward towards Buttermere.

The contrast between the green of the Valley and the more rugged fells surrounding it has evoked paeons of praise from visitors. The Rev. William Gilpin paid this tribute to Lorton. “All is simplicity and repose. Nature, in this scene, lays totally aside her majestic frown and wears a lovely smile.” Mr. W. G. Collingwood, in “The Lake District”, writes “I always think of this valley as made by Heaven for Summer evenings and Summer mornings; green and purple heights, with the sound of waters, under the sunset, or lit with the low north-eastern sun into pure colour above, and the grey of the dew upon the grass.” And to-day we hear similar words of appreciation of the beauty of the Valley from lips of visitors who come year after year to enjoy a time of quiet amidst this lavishness of nature.

But apart from its beauty—and Doreen Wallace once called it “The most beautiful valley in England” although she allows that she might be prejudiced, having been born and spent her childhood in Lorton—the Village has an ancient history of its own. The earliest mention of it would seem to have been about 1195. It is referred to, in a charter still preserved in St. Bees Priory, as Lorentona.

There are various suggestions as to the origin of the name, some authorities favouring a corruption and abbreviation of Lower Town. This, however, is not very convincing. Another conjecture is that the basis of the name is to be found in the old Norse “Hlora”—a roaring river. This would give the place the meaning of “The enclosure by the Torrent.” Yet another suggestion is that the name is derived from the Norse “Ljar-tun”—the Meadow Farm.

Accepting either of these last mentioned derivations, there seems little doubt but that there was, at one time, a settlement of the Vikings here. The Vikings, in the ninth and tenth centuries, landed on the coasts of Cumberland and penetrated into the valleys and there established farms. Place-names of parts of the Parish would bear out this supposition. Brackenthwaite is the Fern Field, while Whinfell is the Broom-hill.

Lorton is mentioned as an original member of the Barony of Allerdale, which was formed when William le Mechin gave his daughter in marriage to Waldicoe, son of the Northumbrian earl Gospatric. Among the grants of land which William bestowed upon his son-in-law was that of the “Five Towns” of which Lorton was one. The little Norse settlement of Lorton was probably, at that time, merely a farm set in the midst of wild and uncultivated country. Its hamlet was Brackenthwaite, which was granted by the then Lord of Allerdale, one Alan fitz Waldeve, to Waldeve fitz Dolfin, about the middle of the twelfth century. The charter gave him leave to feed his pigs in this part of Lorton, and freedom to drive them through any part of the neighbourhood, except Borrowdale. This is doubtless how Swinside derived its name.

Another grant of land in Lorton was made in 1185. This time by Randulf de Lyndesay to the Priory of Carlisle. The Dean and Chapter afterwards had a manor in Lorton, and held their manorial courts here. Along with the grant to the Priory Randulf gave the Miller, his wife and children.

Throughout its history Lorton was part of the Manor of Derwent Fells, and “subject to the honour of Cockermouth.” In 1543 it was held by three men, Richard Winder, William Sands, and William Huddleston, each holding his respective part by “Homage, fealty 3/4 rent, service of witness in Derwent Fells, and suit of court.”



## *The Church*

The Church in Lorton stands in the middle of the Valley, midway between the two villages of High Lorton and Low Lorton. It is surrounded, on three sides, by fells, but is not overshadowed by them. Eastward are Harrot and Kirkfell, while Westward is Whin-fell. To the South lie the higher fells of Loweswater and Buttermere. The mouth of the Valley is to the North, with a gentle rise to Round Close Hill, from where a beautiful view of the Valley is obtained, with the little Church nestling in the centre.

Like so many North Country churches this one is dedicated to St. Cuthbert. Prior Wessington, of Durham, in a list of the places where the monks rested, in their long wanderings, at the time of the Danish terror, bearing the body of St. Cuthbert, gives Lorton as one of them. There is, however, no supporting evidence that Lorton existed at so early a date.

The earliest mention of the Church here is in 1198, when it is described as a Chapel of the important Parish of Brigham. It was not until 1883 that it was made a separate parish, when it was formed out of parts of the Chapelry of Lorton, of Brigham, and Buttermere.

The right of presentation to the Chapel of Lorton at one time belonged to the Fletchers of Hutton-in-the-Forest, descendants of Henry Fletcher of Cockermouth, who entertained Mary Queen of Scots at The Old Hall, when she was on her way to Carlisle. The right of presentation was afterwards bought by the Lowthers. It is now in the gift of the Bishop of Carlisle.

As well as the central Chapel, there were, at one time, dependent chapels at Buttermere and Wythop. An interesting survival of this state of affairs was that, for many years, the four divisions of the Parish were each represented by a churchwarden—Lorton, Brackenthwaite, Wythop, and Buttermere.

Although it could be claimed in 1808 that "Christenings, marriages and funerals have been solemnized at the Parochial Chapel of Lorton for time immemorial" the present building dates only from about that time.

In the year 1805 the condition of the fabric of the Church was such as to be considered unsafe. "The Parochial Chapel of Lorton was in so ruinous a state that we were in imminent danger of our lives whenever we assembled therein for Divine Worship." Some attempt to remedy matters was made, but the task proved to be hopeless. In a letter, applying for a faculty to build a new church the Rev. John Sibson, the then minister, says, "The parishioners of the Chapel of Lorton, at a former meeting, proposed to repair the said Chapel, and accordingly took down a part of both the East and West ends of the same, when to their great astonishment they discovered that the interior part of the walls was filled with clay, except a small portion, immediately under the two small bells, which was cemented with the running mortar. This being the case, a great part of the said Chapel tumbled down, and exhibited the very ruinous state of the whole building. On account of this accident I have left off performing Divine Service in the said Chapel, which is now open at both ends."

It was evidently his intention, for the time being, to hold services in a neighbouring farmhouse, and he asked the Bishop of Chester—in whose Diocese Lorton lay—for his opinion. The Bishop replied, "I have no hesitation in declaring it preferable that your congregation should repair, for Divine Service, to Mosser, Embleton, or other chapels within such a short distance of their homes, rather than to a farmhouse within the Village. When your own people see you leading or accompanying them to a neighbouring place of worship, their own zeal and respect for the day will be better kept up."

The faculty was granted in 1807. In June, 1809, the parishioners, at a Vestry Meeting, issued a statement saying, "We . . . do hereby conclude, resolve and determine that we are perfectly satisfied with the re-edification of the said Chapel, and whatever appertains thereto."

The Squire of the Parish, John Lucock Bragg, had promised to build a tower to the new Church "about three yards square and nine feet above the rigging of the said Chapel." However, when the tower had been built up to the height of the roof "he ordered the workmen off, saying that 'the tower appeared so small and diminutive that it was only like a chimney,' although the plan was his own." The parishioners then asked leave to build "an open bell-case for two bells, as it was before in the old chapel—which will tend to frustrate the capricious whims of our Village Squire." However we find the parishioners, at the same meeting at which they expressed their satisfaction at the rebuilding "Resolved that a small tower-steeple twenty yards square, when measured on the outside—and three yards higher than the rigging of the roof, shall be erected at the West end of the said Chapel, at the expense of the Parish." So came into being the present edifice.

Although the records in the Church Safe date from 1538 they are not in a very good state of preservation, and there are many gaps in them. It is not until we come to the middle of the eighteenth century that they are continuous or regular.

Visitors to the Church are always anxious to see the marriage certificate of "The Beauty of Buttermere." The story of this marriage is interesting and worth recording.

In the year 1802 there arrived at the Fish Inn at Buttermere a gentleman who gave his name as the Honourable Anthony Augustus Hope, M.P., brother of Lord Hopetoun. He is said to have desired a change of fishing from Keswick, where he had been staying, and where he had taken local society by storm. At the Fish Inn he met the landlord's daughter, Mary Robinson, the Beauty of Buttermere, who was much admired by all who met her, Wordsworth and de Quincy included. The Honourable Anthony "wooed her openly and honourably" and eventually captured her heart and hand. On October 2nd they were married at Lorton Church—marriages at that time did not take place at Buttermere, which was a chapel within the Chapelry of Lorton. The honeymoon, which was to have culminated in London "with a brotherly welcome of the noble family, and the smiles of the Court" was rudely interrupted, almost at its beginning, by the hand of the law. Anthony was arrested on a charge of forgery, convicted, and hanged at Carlisle. His real name was Hatfield. He was the son of a Devonshire tradesman. Mary was only one among his many victims. Mary returned to her father's inn and eventually married a farmer from Caldbeck.

Owing to the condition of the records it is not possible to give a complete list of those who have ministered to the Parish of Lorton. However here is the list from the middle of the eighteenth century:

- 1741. Thomas Fisher.
- 1799. John Sibson.
- 1821. William Sewell.
- 1823. Fletcher Fleming.
- 1826. William Armistead.
- 1864. A. Reginald Perring.
- 1872. William Samson Davis.
- 1891. W. Henry Cockett. ✓
- 1901. William Copeland. ✓
- 1904. George Pallister. ✓
- 1915. William Lewis. ✓
- 1940. Arthur Baillie Service. ✓

*Cana Farrar*

*A. W. Johnston*

*J. A. Dixon*

② *Resident*

## The Sunday School

Adjoining the Church there is another little building. This was erected by Elizabeth Bridges, of Lorton Hall, in memory of her husband, Robert Bridges, and presented to Lorton Church for use as a Sunday School, on April 9th, 1863, together with the land on which it stands. In 1887, to mark the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, the building was enlarged to its present size.

The Sunday School dates back further than that, having been begun in 1813. The "Rules and Regulations" for the conduct of the school appear to have been most elaborate, when one takes into consideration the fact that the total population of the Chapelry, at that time, could not have been more than 650. There was a President, a Vice-President, a Treasurer, a Secretary, and a Superintendent. In addition there was a committee of gentlemen and one of ladies. (The number of teachers is not specified.) A member from each of the committees was to attend, in rotation, each Sunday, as "Visitors" "That they may assist, countenance, and support the teachers."

Attendance at Sunday School was much nearer a whole-time job in those days. Rule 7 reads, "The children shall attend school at Nine o'clock on Sunday mornings; in the afternoon from half-past One to Service time; and afterwards till Five o'clock. They shall be required to come clean and neat, and to be obedient to their respective teachers."

Disciplinary measures did not err on the side of leniency. Although we read "Children should not be corrected by corporal punishment, moderate confinement or anything to awaken fear of shame are preferable modes, withholding rewards or making them forfeit what they have had, will be the best way of reclaiming the idle and refractory." Expulsion was quite in order. According to Rule 10, "Instances of absence without just reason shall be reported to the visitors, who, for the first offence, shall reprimand the delinquents, and for the third expel them," while Rule 11 says, "If any of the children be guilty of lying, swearing, pilfering, talking in an improper manner, or otherwise misbehaving themselves, they shall suffer such penalty as the Superintendent or visitors shall think proper; and, if after frequent reproof, they are not reformed, they shall be expelled the school, and their names stuck up as a warning to others."

It is gratifying to read that while the naughty children were to suffer punishment, the well-behaved were to be rewarded. "As an encouragement to the children for early attendance and good behaviour, the Superintendent or visitors shall give them tickets (not exceeding three per day) as rewards, a certain number of which shall entitle them to a tract of a certain value, and a certain number of tracts shall entitle them to a book, or some other token of approbation."

A page from the Log Book of 1858 shows that the disciplinary measures were still being carried out in the spirit of the rules.

"James — and Robert —, both of Low Lorton, were disbanded from the Sunday School, the former for wickedly swearing and raging against the Superintendent in Church, the latter for his bullying conduct to strangers, and Day School scholars by threatening to fight them on the highway."

August 8th, 1858. "John — and his brother —, and sister —, expelled from the Sunday School for irregular attendance."

Two other boys were heading for disaster, "William — and Joseph — told a falsehood and played the truant, engaging themselves (accompanied by their brothers) by bathing on the afternoon of the Lord's Day."

One would like to quote something of the conduct of the well-behaved children, but unfortunately there is only one page of the Log Book in existence, and it contains no record of the rewards earned by them. It must needs be, in this case, as Shakespeare says, "The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones."

The Founder President of the School was the Rev. John Sibson, Curate-in-Charge of the Parish, but there does not appear to have been any provision made for the Curate-in-Charge to hold that office ex-officio.

Mr. Jonathan Musgrave was the first Superintendent, and he continued in office for forty-four years, when, owing to advanced age and infirmity, he resigned. His friends and pupils subscribed to present him with a large, handsome Bible. This Bible has since been presented to the Church and is now in use on the Lectern.

Following Mr. Musgrave, Mr. John Charles Dagleish, master of Lorton Day School, became Superintendent, but he only held office for a matter of a couple of years, being followed, in 1859, by Mr. John Wilson.

## *Lorton Parish Facts and Figures*

Although situated some four miles from the nearest railway station, Lorton is served by good roads which preserve it from isolation, and despite a small population—291 living in 90 houses, according to the 1939 returns—the Parish is fortunate in possessing most modern amenities.

The Parish Council, according to the records, has been most progressive, and duly obtained, after a certain amount of dogged urging, the support of the Rural District Council of Cockermouth for their water, sewage and lighting schemes.

The reservoir on the lower slopes of Kirkfell was built in 1935, and a public supply of water became available in both High Lorton and Low Lorton in that year. The sewage scheme, which cost £6,660, was completed in 1939, whilst the public supply of electricity was made available in 1934, street lighting being switched on in the following year.

Installed in 1929, the Rural Automatic Telephone Exchange was one of the first of its kind to be erected in England.

**THE VILLAGE HALL.** The old brewery was purchased in 1910 on behalf of the Parish, with funds raised in one day by a special effort consisting of a local gift sale. The building, on account of its proximity to the famous tree, is named the Yew Tree Hall. Here meetings, dances and assemblies of all kinds are held, and the Hall has become a real centre of village social life.

**THE PLAYING FIELD.** In 1936 the late S. D. Stanley-Dodgson, of Armiside, presented to the Village the playing field situated adjacent to the School. Here three tennis courts have been laid out, and there are swings and see-saws for the children.

**THE YEW TREE.** At the southern end of the Village stands the Yew Tree. It was here that John Wesley preached, and describes in his journal the two rivers, which are the Cocker and Whitbeck. He is reputed to have admonished his audience, who were perched in the tree, telling them that they were in danger of damaging its branches.

The following items, which are given with their dates, are of importance to Lorton:—

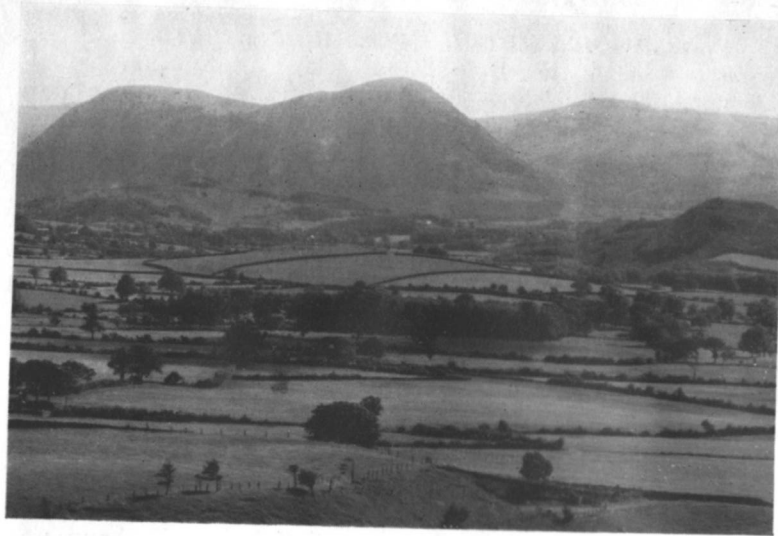
George Fox preached in Lorton Steeple House in 1653.

The Wesleyan Chapel was built in 1840.

The bridge over Whitbeck, at High Mill, was built in 1861.

The Day School, built in 1809, was rebuilt 1859, and again in 1895.

The local branch of the Women's Institute was founded in 1923 and meets regularly in the Yew Tree Hall.



## Some Lorton Literary Associations

By E. R. Denwood

The best known allusion in literature to the Vale of Lorton are Wordsworth's lines to the Yew Tree, which still stands, a ghost of its former self, by the side of Whitbeck.

*There is a Yew-Tree, pride of Lorton Vale,  
Which to this day stands single, in the midst  
Of its own darkness, as it stood of yore;  
Not loth to furnish weapons for the bands  
Of Umfraville or Percy ere they marched  
To Scotland's heaths; or those that crossed the sea  
And drew their sounding bows at Azincour,  
Perhaps at earlier Crecy, or Poitiers.  
Of vast circumference and gloom profound  
This solitary tree! a living thing  
Produced too slowly ever to decay;  
Of form and aspect too magnificent  
To be destroyed.*

Besides Wordsworth there are other poets and writers who have found inspiration for their muse in what Lorton-born Doreen Wallace in her delightful book "English Lakeland" calls "The loveliest village in the loveliest valley in England. It is an old village built of stone, white-washed and pink-washed here and there, and much embellished as to its wall-crannies by spleenwort and parsley fern. . . So green a valley, so silvery a beck, so rich the lanes in dog-violets in the Spring—how lucky I was to spend my childhood there."

Doreen Wallace was born at Broomlands, and the scenes of two of her novels, "Latter Howe" and "The Faithful Compass" are laid in the vicinity.

A poet and writer on old Cumberland customs, the late John Bolton, was for some time schoolmaster at Lorton School, and various of his poems deal with scenes and incidents in, and around, the Village, the best known being his verses on "Nanny Witch Pool," a place near the Village, popularly supposed to be haunted. He, too, has a poem on the Lorton Yew.

*Here by the stream it stands alone,  
As verdant and as hale  
As when the Britons bows were drawn  
To guard this lovely Vale.*

*It stands, the pride of Lorton, still,  
Although its glory's done;  
For centuries its seen yon hill  
Reflect the ev'ning sun.*

*By archers sought in bygone days  
To furnish trusty bows,  
When Lorton men in bloody frays  
Defeated Scottish foes.*

*It grew, a tree of great resort,  
And neath its ample shade  
The villagers enjoyed their sport  
On merry May-day made.*

*And oft it looked on happy scenes,  
As when, beneath its bowers  
They decked the bonny village queens  
With wreaths of wildwood flowers.*

*Long may it stand, a link to bind  
Us to the jocund past.  
But, Ah, the sport of time and wind  
'Twill die and fall at last.*

In Lorton, too, John Denwood found inspiration for several of his delightful "Cumbrian Carols," two of the sweetest being "Nell of Lorton Vale" and "The Maid of Ghyll-Brier," the latter, with a musical setting by Lancelot Shortridge, being his most popular song.



Through Lorton's green vale, from its source in the hills  
A mountain stream tumbles down steep rocky ghylls,  
And winds by a dwelling, the home of a maid  
In whom the fair goddess of love is portrayed.  
More bright than the meteors that fall from the skies  
Are glances of love from this maiden's blue eyes,  
And Cupid has set my young bosom on fire  
For thee, my sweet Mary, the Maid of Ghyll-Brier.

I've looked upon many fair scenes with delight  
Where mountain and woodland and water unite,  
Yet ne'er have I looked on a valley more fair  
Than Lorton's green vale; and my Mary is there.  
I've looked into palaces grand to behold,  
Adorned with fair maidens, decked in rubies and gold,  
Yet lovlier far, in their lowly attire  
Are yonder lone cot, and the Maid of Ghyll-Brier.

How lovely in Springtime the daisy to see,  
Its beauties unclosing upon the green lea,  
How lovely the lamb on the mountain to view,  
Its fleecy coat washed in the purest of dew;  
How lovely the lily, where Cocker's streams wind,  
Yet Mary's more lovely than all these combined.  
Then give me the maid that a saint would desire,  
My life's broadest blessing, the Maid of Ghyll-Brier.

Though the days of young passion will quickly pass o'er,  
And age, with cold hand, second childhood restore,  
So long as yon cot is made lovely by thee  
Old age, and its cares, are as nothing to me.  
The beams from thy eyes my old bosom will cheer,  
Like beams from the sun when the winter is here,  
Till calmly, at sunset, from life I retire  
To sleep in the vale with the Maid of Ghyll-Brier.

Denwood was a true countryman, and found his greatest inspiration in the mountains and valleys of his native county. Though he could mingle for a time in the life of cities, his heart ever yearned to be back among the sights and sounds of his beloved Lakeland, for there, and there only, could he find the peace and beauty that he loved; and there he sleeps:—

"Sleeps in t'lap o' t'sunlit hill

Whoar t'beck runs by throo Hoggast Ghyll."—R. Dodd.

A friend of John Denwood's, and a well-known Cumbrian dialect poet, Stanley Martin, wrote what is perhaps one of the most popular dialect songs in the North of England, "Ah Yance went ta Lorton ta sweetheart a Lass." It was based, it is said, on an

incident in the poet's own life, but whether or no, it is full of rich Cumbrian humour, and character, and will be sung as long as there are dialect speakers to sing it.

" Ah yance went ta Lorton ta sweetheart a lass,  
(Fwok said 'at her fadder had seaved a bit brass)  
Its a lang drabbly road, an' I went a gay sheak,  
For it started ta rain, bit Ah dud'na turn back,  
Nay, nut a bit on't, rainy or dry,  
Ah niver tak nwootish o' t' wedder, nut I.

She dud mak me welcome; Ah sat doon in t' neuk,  
Says she, 'Lad thoo's hung-rey, Ah see by thee leuk;  
An' thoo's wet—hing thee cwoat ower t' chair-back tull  
its dry,  
Hes ta choice atween cold bacon, boiled or het fried'  
Sed Ah, 'Nay, nut a bit on't, roast, boil or fry,  
Ah niver find faut about cucking, nut I.'

Ah finished me supper, poo'd t'lass on me knee;  
Says Ah, 'Noo thoo'll gie me a kiss, Ah can see'  
She tew'd an sed, 'Will ta be whiet, Ah says?'  
D'ye think 'at Ah minded hur when she sed 'Nay'  
Nay, nut a bit on't, if t'lass sud be shy  
Ah niver tak ya nay, nor two, nay, nut I.

Weel, just as Ah kissed hur in boonces t'oald lad,  
He stamped an' he swore, aye, by jing, he was mad;  
He winned aw up wid a nwootice ta quil;  
Says Ah, 'Min gang on'; Ah's nut mindin' a bit;  
Nay, nut a bit on't, wad ye know why?  
Ah niver tak t'boggle at scoldin', nut I.

Says he, 'Mary Jane' iv a swort ov a whine,  
'If thoo weds him thoo'll nut touch a penny ov mine'  
Says Ah, 'Niver mind lass' an' gev hur a wink,  
'Its thee 'at Ah's efter, Ah want nowt wid t'chink,  
Nay, nut a bit on't, lass, divent sigh,  
Ah niver care owt about money, nut I.'

Says she, 'Than Ah deu, thoo's a feuil, Ah can see,  
Ah wad rayder, a lang way, hev t'money than thee,'  
Says Ah, 'Than Ah finnd Ah's mistakken, Good Neel,  
Wat! sweethearts ur plentiful, Ah willn't fret,  
Nay, nut a bit on't, Ah bid ye good-bye,  
Ah'll nut break me heart for a woman, nut I.' "

Another dialect writer who was born in Lorton, and is buried in the Churchyard there, was Jim Sargisson (Peter Robinson) author of the popular "Joe Swap" stories, published in 1881. On his father's tombstone—he was also called Peter—in Lorton Churchyard, is the following quaint inscription:—

*"Of no distempers, by no blast he died,  
But fell like Autumn fruit that mellowed long;  
Even wondered at because he dropped no sooner.  
He seemed to be wound up for four score years,  
But freshly ran on eight winters more,  
Till, like a clock worn out with rating time,  
The weary wheels of life at last stood still;  
He died, as he had lived, a holy, happy man."*