

TWO LANCASTER ANTIQUARIES

Andrew White

Abstract

This paper describes and compares the lives and interests of two Lancaster antiquaries in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. The two individuals described here were female and male, upper-middle-class and working-class, educated and uneducated respectively. They were about as far apart socially as you could get in Lancaster, yet for different reasons both had developed a fascination with the past.

Alice Johnson

The first was Alice Johnson, born at Hampson House in Ellel in March 1849 and, unusually, a female antiquary. Unlike other women of her period, who might travel in a wagonette with husband or family to visit antiquities with the local antiquarian society, she was an antiquary in her own right, with an interest and specialised knowledge of her own and with her own collections, particularly of Roman Samian ware, a fine, glossy-red pottery decorated with moulded scenes. Unusually, too, she published at least two papers in the *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*.¹

Alice was the daughter of Dr James Johnson of Lancaster. She had eight sisters and one brother, born between 1843 and 1856, and had a twin, Jeannette. Her father was one of a notable local family of medical doctors and intellectuals, so undoubtedly her background and upbringing guided her interests. In 1851 the family moved to Greenfield in Lancaster and in 1861 to 32 Cable Street. In 1871 they were at Hampson House, near Galgate, where her father now appeared as ‘farmer’, though undoubtedly a gentleman farmer. By 1881 she was living with her uncle Christopher Johnson at 12 Castle Park in Lancaster, on her own means. He died in 1894 and she seems to have inherited the house in the following year.² By 1901, still living on her own means, she was now recorded as the head of household at No.12, and in 1911 she was still there, living with her twin sister, Jeannette. It is not clear when she left Castle Park but in the 1920s she was at Brooklands in Galgate and by the time of her death in 1943 she was living at Elm House, Bowness which, on the evidence of the 1939 special census on the eve of the Second World War, was a nursing home.

We know little about her education, which may have been carried out privately at home. We gain a small hint of continuing education when we see her in 1880 attending a Cambridge Local Lecture series on Physical Geography in Lancaster, with her twin sister, several cousins and a number of the future luminaries of Lancaster.^{3, 4} Where she picked up her antiquarian interests is unclear, but her extended family was one full of intellectual curiosity. Perhaps the answer is that her father’s interests rubbed off on her, since he had presented a (not very good) paper on Lancaster to the British Archaeological Association at its meeting in Manchester in 1850, the year after Alice’s birth.⁵ It was not the custom to educate daughters beyond a certain point, however intelligent. At least she had private means, enabling her to do things other women could not: she even supported research programmes. She could also purchase archaeological finds, especially Samian ware, from workmen on local building and street works. With age came unimpeachable respectability and that unique position that could be held by a single woman of property, which set her apart from contemporary women.

Her collection of Samian ware was very extensive, and she gave it to Lancaster City Museum, accession number LM23.15. It was partly catalogued by herself and, along with other local finds, by Thomas May, the excavator of the Roman site at Wilderspool near Warrington.⁶ Later Dr Grace Simpson made a detailed survey of Alice Johnson’s collection and took rubbings of it as part of her

survey of Central Gaulish potters. These too are held by the City Museum. Another miscellaneous group of finds (including lamps, a flagon, net-sinker and spindle whorl) came from her collection to the City Museum under accession number LMA262/1-4. Her period of maximum activity seems to have been in the early years of the twentieth century when she was at Castle Park. This coincides with her gaining financial independence after the death of her father and uncle and ceasing, perhaps, to act as their housekeeper. It seems very likely that the garden there might tell a story of its own, with discarded Roman pottery!

Her interests extended beyond Lancaster. In 1909 she contributed to a fund set up by the Society of Antiquaries to explore an extensive and well-known deposit of Samian ware off the Kentish coast on Pudding Pan Rock, thought to be the cargo of a Roman ship wrecked while carrying Samian ware to Britain.⁷ She also carried out work on a Roman pottery and tile kilns at Low Pleasant in Quernmore, along with members of the Kelsall family between 1909 and 1912. A small uncatalogued notebook with a handwritten account of some of this work survives in Lancaster Library and is quoted extensively by Geoffrey Leather.⁸ It is headed 'Quernmore Excavations 1908'.

Low Pleasant Estate, Quernmore, Nr. Lancaster
Account of Excavations May 13th & 14th 1908.

We began with a deposit of tiles and pots discovered already and identified as of the Romano British period. The site is near the road towards Caton and not far from the old Dog & Partridge now a Temperance Hotel, and the digging was in a tongue of land laid down in pasture. A square yard of beaten clay flooring, about two feet below the grass, produced a garden barrow load of flanged and ridge tiles and a few pots. The flanged were pinker than the red ridge tiles and some of the latter were apparently made of Brosely clay.

The pots were mostly unadorned red ones of small size of the common sorts. Bits of rims chiefly, and on the largest a potter's mark, not with letters. Some were washed over with slip, red or white. Half a dozen pieces of smoother ware turned up, one with raised dots, and a second with raised little crescents. Possibly a roof support had given way, and precipitated the tiles and pots in this narrow area. No Samian pottery was found. On May 14th the clay floor below the pots was traced further, and found to narrow into a channel of 15 inches wide with clay sides, and in this shape it descended gradually to about four feet below the grass level, and four and a half feet from the pot platform, running across the tongue of land toward the South and when the middle was thus reached an oval basin of unbaked clay was found shaped in the soil, and measuring 2 feet by 2 feet 6 inches in diameter and one foot in depth. Investigation showed that the farther side of the basin was a duplication of the near side. The same sized passage ascended in the same gradient and served the same purpose...

...The space within which we worked was only eight yards by four and a half and the time given out of busy days equalled one man 15 hours, So far no face stones, coins, bones, metal, post sockets nor graffiti have been found. TK WK AJ

The initials at the bottom are those of Alice and two of the Kelsalls. The writing is undoubtedly that of Alice herself. If the findings of the excavation seem somewhat incomprehensible, that is because they are. A number of later excavations on this and nearby sites in Quernmore have been equally inconclusive, partly because of the very limited area examined, while medieval ironworking seems to have occurred in the same places.

Alice was responsible for the recording of two previously unknown medieval crosses used as boundary markers, Crawley's Cross and Askel's Cross in Cockersand Moss.⁹ She also seems to have recorded a story related to a Roman burial urn found in Penny Street in Lancaster, and a ghost story associated with it.¹⁰ Alice served for many years on the Museums Committee of Lancaster Borough Council and lent a number of items to the 'Old Lancaster' exhibition in 1908, which show that her interests extended well beyond the Roman period.¹¹ Along with her twin sister she was a long-time member of the Royal Archaeological Institute, the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society and the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society.

Peter Rogerson

The second antiquary is Peter Rogerson. Peter was a Victorian eccentric born in Skerton about 1794 who collected antiquities, especially Roman coins. He seems to have been a poor and uneducated man, so what he knew of Roman coins must have been largely self-taught. It is probable that he was helped by someone who had a greater knowledge and access to books than himself but, if so, we do not know who. There were a number of candidates in Victorian Lancaster. As a working-class man he has left much less trace in the records than Alice Johnson.

Most of his coins came from the sewerage excavations of the 1850s which took place in central Lancaster, involving many deep trenches. Part of this network can still be traced by the distinctive Lancaster Board of Health (LBH) iron grids, sometimes dated '1853' or '1854'. He worked for Moores of New Street, ironmongers and grocers, but later had a stall on the market selling odds and ends. For a brief period from August 1853 he opened a small 'Antiquarian Repository' or 'Museum of Antiquities' in Moor's Building, Bridge Lane.¹² It contained about 300 Roman copper coins and other antiquities for sale (not necessarily all from Lancaster).¹³ His antiquarian interests must have been funded by the sale of some of these coins, but he clearly had a genuine taste for and knowledge of the coins.

In 1842 he had emigrated to Newfoundland, but this was not a success and, helped by subscriptions from friends, he came back to Lancaster in 1852. At some stage he is said to have built and lived at 1 Peter Street, the only house in that street, near St Thomas' Church (Figure 1). This cannot at present be proved as the deeds are in private hands. In 1861 he was living in Bridge Lane and was recorded as a 'black tape and needle hawker'. He married twice, firstly Ellen Gabbott in 1856 and secondly Elizabeth Harker or Smith in 1870. He had a house in Penny's Hospital when he married again. He died in 1879 at the age of 85 by which time he was for some reason (presumably poverty) an inmate of the Union Workhouse in Lancaster.

Some of the coins can be identified from the local newspapers and particularly from the three volumes of 'Lancaster Fifty Years Ago'¹⁴ drawn from the pages of the *Lancaster Guardian*. Nothing equivalent exists for the *Lancaster Gazette*, which often took a different view on the news. Even the available resources online and on microfilm contain many *lacunae* but are improving as more newspapers are digitised. Some reports also appear in the Preston papers and the *Westmorland Gazette*.

Vicarage Fields	Coin of Constantius II	<i>Lancaster Guardian</i> 30/4/1853
Castle Hill/Churchyard	Coins of Domitian, Trajan (copper), Tetricus, silver twopence Elizabeth I	<i>Lancaster Guardian</i> 4/6/1853
Fleet Square	Coin of Faustina I (1st brass, an old name for a <i>sestertius</i>)	<i>Lancaster Guardian</i> 30/7/1853
No location but 9' deep in sewerage	Two copper coins of Domitian & one of Claudius	<i>Lancaster Guardian</i> 2/11/1853

Church Street (sawpit of TC & G Nelson)	Coin of Constantine the Great	<i>Lancaster Gazette</i> 18/2/1854
Church Street	Two coins of Trajan	<i>Lancaster Guardian</i> 15/7/1854 acquired by Mr Brown, artist
Fleet Square	Coin of Valentinianus I	<i>Lancaster Gazette</i> 22/7/1854
Union Square	<i>Denarius</i> of Ant. Pius obverse, Marcus Aurelius reverse	<i>Lancaster Guardian</i> 17/8/1854
No location	Coins of Vespasian and Claudius II	<i>Westmorland Gazette</i> 4/11/1854
Church Street	Coins of Vespasian and Trajan	<i>Lancaster Guardian</i> 21/4/1855
Edward Street	Coin of Faustina II	<i>Lancaster Guardian</i> 4/8/1855
Vicarage Lane (garden at foot)	Coin of Antoninus Pius	<i>Lancaster Gazette</i> 19/4/1856
Hillside (Miss Dilworth's garden)	Rare coin of Saxon Heptarchy	<i>Lancaster Gazette</i> 15/10/1859
House of Town Clerk	Coin of Domitian	<i>Westmorland Gazette</i> 6/9/1862
North Road (premises of Parkinson, plumber)	Coins of Julia Domna, Hadrian and Vespasian	<i>Lancaster Gazette</i> 22/8/1868
Church Street (and elsewhere)	PR presents pottery with makers' names etc. to Mechanics Institute	<i>Lancaster Gazette</i> 31/10/1868
Deep Cutting, Scotforth	Finds including stone head and Roman pottery	<i>Lancaster Gazette</i> 18/12/1869

In 1869 Peter Rogerson was subjected to a most malicious hoax, presumably intended by some wit to reveal his lack of learning. A stone slab with an inscription was 'found' at the Priory Church and obtained by Rogerson. Its apparently Latin inscription was soon shown to be a piece of music-hall-type cockney verse, divided up to resemble Latin.¹⁵ Is it coincidence that we hear no more of Peter's discoveries after this? It must have been deeply hurtful.



Fig.1 The single house on Peter Street, Lancaster, at the rear of St Thomas' Church, alleged to have been built by or for Peter Rogerson. In view of his later poverty this seems quite unlikely, but proof is lacking. Source: Andrew White

Summary

These two individuals came from very different strata of society and so appear in very different types of record. It is of interest that someone such as Peter Rogerson, clearly struggling financially for most of his life, could still take up an interest that was usually regarded as the preserve of the middle class and could make a local name for himself.

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