

IN MEMORY OF HENRY QUICK

We have met today to celebrate the Bicentenary of Henry Quick, the Zennor Poet, who was born just 200 years ago, on 4th December 1792, at Lady Downs in the higher part of this parish. He would have been astonished at this gathering, since his life was a very sad one, a constant struggle against poverty, ill-health, and other misfortunes, all of which he faced bravely, strengthened by his devout Christian faith.

His father, also called Henry Quick, was a miner who came to Lady Downs to improve a smallholding, and in January 1792 he married Margery George at Zennor; the poet Henry was their only child. It seems likely that the family were poor relations of the well-known yeoman Quicks, who farmed at Wicca and elsewhere in and around Zennor.

Henry Quick the elder had a sister Jane, who married Hannibal Thomas, brother of William Thomas of Boswednack, who was celebrated for fathering 23 children on two wives over forty years, and was known as 'Willie One-More'. It has been thought that Henry Quick the elder had another sister, who married a Behenna and was the grandmother of Sir Henry Irving the actor, but it now appears that Irving's grandmother was Catherine Curnow, and not a Quick, but that her mother and Henry Quick the elder's mother were sisters.

We learn most about the life of Henry Quick the younger, the poet, from his verse autobiography, or Life and Progress, first published in 1836:

'Twas on fair Cornwall's north-west shore,
On Zennor coast, December four,
Seventeen hundred ninety-two,
Born was I in this world of woe.
My parents they were honest poor,
Just kept the wolf from off the door;
My father laboured underground,
Mother the spinning-wheel put round.
When I was but a little child,
Convulsion-fits soon drove me wild,
As teeth were cutting in my head
I many minutes lay as dead;

Nor did I seem to note or know,
As other children mostly do;
For I was in a sad strange way,
My tender parents oft did say.

My mother of me took great care,
Me hardly out of sight could bear,
Whilst other little boys were free
To play, I wanted liberty.

When I was eight years old, indeed,
Mother put me to school to read;
Though slow at first I seem'd to take,
Yet soon I did a progress make.

Of what I read, the greatest part,
I very soon had got by heart;
Borrow'd much books and read them through
And bought a quantity also.

Many good people of each degree,
Sev'ral fine books did give to me,
And in the same I took delight,
My constant study day and night.

Chapters and stories could repeat,
With every syllable complete;
I likewise learn'd in little time
To write, and then composed rhyme.

When Henry Quick was twelve, disaster hit the family. His father died, leaving the widow and son in dire poverty. They could not manage the smallholding at Lady Downs, and sold it and moved to Mill Downs.

When father died I had not learn'd
One single penny then to earn;
My mother by her toil and pain,
Had me thus wholly to maintain.

My father, he, at Lady Downs,
Leased a few acres of croft ground,
And built a little cottage there,
High rent thirty shillings per year.

Of which he small improvement made,
Before he in the grave was laid;
So poor and barren it became,
Mother resolved to sell the same.

When two long years had rolled round,
She sold the same for twenty pounds;
A cottage, thirty shillings rent,
Five years we liv'd in, till 'twas spent.

We then grew poorer every day,
Were forced to beg some parish pay;
From door to door went up and down,
From street to street, from town to town.

I did to riper years arrive,
And then some other means contrive,
To earn my bread by industry,
And not depend on charity.

When in my twenty-seventh year,
Measles did then on me appear;
When I was aged thirty-one,
Small-pox my body over-run.

We gather'd brooms and got them bound,
And sold them to the country round;
Who wants a broom? Be pleased to buy,
I've got good ones, can you supply.

Sometimes a little job I found,
To dig potatoes or break ground;
Cutting of turf and peat also,
A little I did sometimes do.

It occurred to some well-wishers that Henry could earn money from his talent for writing verses:

At last some good kind gentlemen,
Took pity and did me befriend;
Commended much my poetry,
And got them printed off for me.

My printed copies then did sell,
And people seem'd to like them well;
Parish to parish, town to town,
I travell'd through and sold them round.

In selling books I took delight,
Oft-times abroad to take my flight,
And store my mind with subjects new,
But let them be what's just and true.

Be pleas'd to buy my little book,
And don't despise nor overlook;
Please to take pity on poor Henny,
I love to gain an honest penny.

And may the Lord my mind dispose,
On worthy subjects to compose,
That they may good examples be,
And useful to posterity.

His earliest known work is a poem on the death in 1822 of William Thomas junior, the eldest son of 'Willie one - more'. Ten years later, when Henry was forty, he was sufficiently well-known locally to be the subject of one of Richard Pentreath's series of prints on 'Penzance Public Characters'. As well as by selling his verses,

he would make a little money by cutting milestones, and by distributing religious magazines and tracts.

Then in 1834 disaster struck again: his mother died, leaving him alone in an unsympathetic world. Marriage seemed a possible solution, but as a pauper he lacked eligibility, despite rumours that he had a secret hoard of money.

But now came on sharp trials strong,
Some secret foes did me great wrong,
Their lying tongues soon spread around,
That I'd got sav'd many a pound.

God witness be, I truth confess,
One single pound I didn't possess,
Should death this day my portion be,
I've not enough to bury me.

Some secret foes commended me,
Unto a loose and faithless she;
To whom I was by marriage vows,
To be the tender loving spouse.

Although our banns in church were call'd,
The same for good was overrul'd;
I suffer'd full ten shillings loss,
Which was to me a bitter cross.

When she did view my humble home,
And found that riches I had none,
She quickly turn'd her back on me,
And never more my face would see.

But God, I trust, this trial blest,
And made all things work for the best;
Had she become my wedded wife,
It might have cost my precious life.

After this narrow escape marriage, of a sort, was the solution found. In 1835 he married Jane Rowe, a widow from Morvah, who at 67 was 24 years his senior. Sadly, the marriage was not happy, though it served its purpose of keeping him alive and out of the workhouse. He did not find domestic peace in his later years, as he frankly disclosed in his autobiography:

At forty-three I took a wife,
To be my guide through future life;
For I was very much distress'd,
Quite desolate and comfortless.

Although her strength is almost spent,
Her mind is still on labour bent;
But by the means of cruel foes,
I have experienced many woes.

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Cursed are those who maketh strife,
And discord cause 'twixt man and wife;
And such as easy do believe,
A lying tongue will soon deceive.

Eight tedious years of grief and strife,
I've suffer'd with a jealous wife,
Her discontent torments me sore,
Suspicious I have paltry store.

Poverty is a grievous trouble,
But harsh reflection makes it double,
When poverty in doors doth hie,
Out window love doth swiftly fly.

Jane died in 1855 aged 87, thus leaving Henry alone again. This time there was no escape; he neglected himself, neighbours failed to look after him, and he died of consumption at Mill Downs on 9th October 1857 aged 64.

We must admit that Henry Quick's poetic talent was meagre. His work is mostly doggenel, and its interest lies not in its literary merit but in the glimpses it provides of life in West Cornwall in the 19th century. His greatest effort was the Life and Progress, a simple record of a sad life; he describes his many trials at length, but accepts his lot with patient resignation, always confident that the Lord knows best, and will provide:

Lord, banish malice from my mind,
To pride nor passion be inclin'd,
Let me in love and meekness live,
Learn to forget and to forgive.

O may I never be dismayed,
Trust in the Lord, be not afraid,
To be my providential friend,
Whose love and mercy knows no end.

Content and peace is all I crave,
Nor noise or strife I wish to have;
My all-wise maker, ever blest,
Doth order all things for the best.

Though poor and mean should be my lot,
Let sweet content dwell in my cot;
Disdain no humble life to live,
With gratitude ask and receive.

Now to conclude what I have penn'd,
I trust the Lord will stand my friend,
And give me grace while here on earth,
And endless glory after death.

The main theme of his other works was Disaster, sudden death in its more sensational forms, usually within a few miles of Zennor. People liked to read of their neighbours' misfortunes, and for more than thirty years Henry Quick was the chronicler of local catastrophes, recording deaths by lightning, by suicide, and by accidents at sea, in the mine, in the home, on the farm, and on the highway. Occasionally he wrote on less mournful topics, such as the Coronation of Queen Victoria and the opening of Pendeen Church, but the tastes of his readers led him back to doom and gloom, nearly always with the dread reminder: This could have been you, Repent and be ready for your own end. Thus after describing the sad fate of Pascoe Semmens of Ludgvan, killed by lightning when cutting turves on Castle-an-Dinas, he ended on a thunderous note:

His withered body in the dust must lay,
 Until the last great resurrection day;
 The trump shall sound, ten thousand thunders roar,
 Shall cleave the ground and all the dead restore.

Loud calls around us from the Lord are sent,
 And yet rebellious sinners won't repent;
 God's awful judgment's through the earth abroad,
 "Sinners awake! Prepare to meet your God!"

O sinner should the Lord in vengeance frown,
 Where wilt thou run if justice cuts thee down?
 Thy soul would drop into a burning hell,
 Where none but damned souls and devils dwell.

Repent with speed and rightly be advis'd,
 Before another thunder storm should rise;
 If thus prepar'd no need hast thou to fear,
 Though stricken dead shalt swift to heaven repair.

When Henry Quick died, the Cornish Telegraph gave him a full and sympathetic obituary, praising his simplicity and honesty, describing him as a local celebrity who would be much missed, and claiming that the world he had left was something the better for his humble talents, and that he would not soon be forgotten. But memory was fickle, and 16 years later Henry Nicholls of Zennor, trying to find out about Henry Quick's life, found "all the aged people gone dead, and the younger nearly forgot of what manner of person he was".

Yet in 1896, astonishingly, Henry Quick was given an entry in the Dictionary of National Biography, the first and so far the only Zennor man to be thus honoured; one seeks in vain for Willie 'one-more' Thomas, James Stevens, John Davey of Boswednack, or John Quick of Wicca.

We remember Henry Quick today, two centuries after his birth, as a Zennor Worthy; a chronicler of rural poverty and disaster, a painstaking though uninspired versifier, and a pauper whose name may survive when his wealthier contemporaries are mostly forgotten. Remember the lines from Gray's Elegy, which Henry Quick used to describe his own work:

“Let not ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.”