

Charlotte Straker Memorial Trust – Centenary Dinner

Thursday 20th September 2018

Madam Chairman, Berenice, Ladies and Gentlemen,

What an achievement! A century of arrival and development, of growth and adapting to change, of facing difficulties, of meeting challenges – especially those of the last twenty years - of becoming as now an established, effective, respected, vital and (I dare to let you blush) a loved part of the local community.

Thank you for the honour of being invited to speak this evening. Some of you may be wondering, like me, why I am here. Having spent the last thirty years or so working for a rather different kind of charity, I realise that any support I have given to Charlotte Straker has been puny and sporadic. I certainly do not deserve this honour; but those of you who know my cousin Richard, one of your Trustees, will be aware that there is beneath that benign and sympathetic exterior the hard core of determination of oarsman and cyclist which it is better not to resist.

What I can offer is the view of an outsider – and as an outsider I do CONGRATULATE YOU on what you and your predecessors at Charlotte Straker have achieved. This is a signal example of the sort of community self-help which, unless I am mistaken, will become increasingly important in the times ahead.

It is right and entirely justified for you to celebrate this notable milestone; it is also an opportunity to take stock of how you got where you are – and, perhaps, to assess whether the historical origins of Charlotte Straker have any significance - especially for the future.

I will not rehearse the excellent written accounts of Charlotte Straker's extraordinary progress, as written for the *Hexham Courant* by Gemma Brown, no doubt, based on information provided by you, Berenice, or your predecessors, Peter Wood and Bill Cunningham, or other experts here. If you have not read it, I do recommend that you do; I found it both interesting, helpful to me – and frankly, rather heroic.

So instead I wish to say a little of what happened before 1918 and the family tragedy which led to the foundation. When I start my next sentence, you will wonder how long you must wait for dinner but please be reassured that it is only a few minutes away.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries – in the 1530s – was arguably the greatest disruption of what we now call the social services in our history. In these parts the monasteries had been since the 7th century not just centres of worship but, in modern terms, the schools, hotels, chemists, hospitals, orphanages. Within their limitations they provided care for the mentally disturbed, the oppressed, the hungry, the abused, the aged decayed in their circumstances – indeed the lame, the halt and the blind. After the Dissolution almost all these services, where they existed at all, depended on government, too distracted elsewhere, under-

resourced and ill-equipped, or on those with private wealth, to whom at one end of a scale charitable spending might not have been a high priority, and at the other an indifference along the lines of 'the poor are always with us' – not so much *laissez faire* as *laissez tomber*.

Nevertheless, many and various charitable institutions date to the 16th and 17th centuries. It is no accident that we have prominent local schools called after King Edward VI at Morpeth, Queen Elizabeth at Hexham and, though more disguised, Newcastle's Royal Grammar School, a church school in the time of Henry VIII, re-founded as a free grammar school in 1600. These were for boys only. For very lucky girls there were eventually enlightened governesses, or dame schools – but usually learning was close to mother's apron strings. But range of skills taught was limited and aspirations low – the main aim to give training in the arts of being wife and mother. It is one of the great disgraces of the progress of civilisation that it took so long for men to discover that women were intelligent.

More pertinent to Charlotte Straker there were, too, foundations of alms houses, often called hospitals as with the Holy Jesus Hospital, again in Newcastle, built in 1681. A few hospitals, started as church institutions with lay support, survived the Dissolution. That which gave its name to Spittal Tongues, built significantly outside Newcastle's town walls, in 15thC by Roger Thornton who gave money for the 'leprous men' there. Generally, especially outside the big towns, these institutions were small and often short-lived.

The study of medicine imported variously from the Muslim world, and the universities of Holland, flourished first and enduringly in the universities of Reformation Scotland, especially Edinburgh and Aberdeen. The Scottish doctor was to become a stock character in works of fiction from the 18th century through to Stevenson's Dr Jekyll, and Cronin's Dr Finlay – and even to James Heriot's *All Creatures Great and Small*. Yet there was no system; a doctor, trained to a standard acceptable in his profession, would set himself (almost invariably himself) as might a lawyer, or even a cobbler or fishmonger – and give a service to establish a reputation.

The progress of care, hospitality and charity remained, too often inadequately, in a balance of private and public hands. In the later 18th century and particularly in 19th century there was a significant change of pace. Expanding population and its concentration because of industry underlined the need for new standards in health care. Fever hospital and lying-in hospitals were established; most market towns eventually had charitable dispensaries (roughly equivalent to clinics or surgeries today). The application of new wealth made through industry was rather different from former sources of charity. Most often new industrialists, and those in the ancillary occupations that grew up alongside, were not from aristocratic or land-owning backgrounds. They brought with them a closer understanding of the needs of ordinary people because, very often, they themselves came from the ranks of ordinary people. Progress in care was very uneven. Some newly-rich could be grindingly oppressive; others were paternalistic; others still, notably the Quakers in early industry, set a pace for fair treatment and improving circumstances. The way was scarred with shocking

examples of exploitation, with disputes, strikes and riots. Yet there was improvement and progress.

In the North East the progress of the Straker family is typical of a wider pattern of turning industrial and mercantile wealth towards charitable purposes. And the Charlotte Straker Trust is part of that progress.

I must swiftly admit that I am not an expert on Straker family history - so apologies to any present who are – but it is difficult to take even a cursory interest without becoming fascinated.

It is not unusual in a charity of any age, especially one as busy as Charlotte Straker, for information about those memorialised and benefactors to fade. So, what do we know of Charlotte Straker, whose death from measles in 1917 precipitated the property gift and endowment – and resulted in the Trust which still bears her name? And what of her husband? Who were “Uncle Joe and Aunt Bunch” as the family used to call them? The answer seems to be not much; there is work to be done but, at least, we can make a start.

Joseph Henry Straker was named after his grandfather Joseph Henry who appears in a directory of 1822 as Joseph Streaker (an indication of how little the name was then known) a ship owner of South Preston, Tynemouth. This sounds grand, but he was one of over 100 in Tynemouth – and half as many again in Newcastle. Another on the list is Edward Coppin, of East Street. This is a rare name; just one other appears in the directory, a Mrs Coppin, listed under ‘Gentry’ who was perhaps Edward’s widowed mother.

I cannot say what the Straker and Coppin ships were carrying but, in view of what soon happens, we may guess that it was coal. What we do know is that Joseph Straker’s son John (1815-1885) married Edward Coppin’s daughter and heiress, Isabella – a convenient union of ship owners with, apparently, colliery connections.

Again, I do not know the precise connection between the Strakers and the rapidly developing coal fields to the south-west of Durham city – at Willington, Brancepeth and Brandon – or with Thomas Love, a self-made colliery worker who was soon to become their partner. What is known is that between them they realised and then exploited the potential for Durham coal to be converted into less dangerous coke and to take advantage of by-products such as gas. Straker and Love were soon very prosperous.

That prosperity was marked as family grew: In 1851 (using the Census, of course) John and Isabella had three young children: John Coppin Straker, aged four; Marianna, two; and, making his first appearance, your benefactor, Joseph Henry then aged 10 months – and, emphasising needs as well as means, the household included three female servants, all in their 20s.

Ten years later (in 1861) the Strakers, now living in Loraine Terrace, Preston, Tynemouth, had eight children and five female servants – a household of 15 which included a governess,

nurse, house maid, nurse maid and cook. By then Joseph Henry was ten and increasingly aware of the disputes which centred on his father's coal workings. Straker and Low gave fair pay but would not at that stage allow union men or organisation.

By 1871 Joseph Henry was no longer living at home but had become a student at Edinburgh University – but studying what? It would be interesting to know. In any case it seems clear that he came back to assist his father and brother in the colliery business. In 1874 the family moved to Stagshaw, where, eleven years later, John died and was buried at St Aidan's, the little church he had built which was completed the same year. John Coppin Straker, Joseph's older brother became head of the family and it his branch of the Strakers who have lived at Stagshaw ever since.

Joseph acquired land in Corbridge, built Howden Dene (1892), which became his family home, and also the Prior House which was to become Charlotte Straker Hospital. Where Joseph and Charlotte met is yet to be discovered.

Charlotte's family was also typical of the age but in a different field, the professions. Her father, Edmund Bingham Turner was the youngest of 14 children of Major General Charles Bingham Turner, a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, who had served in Egypt and at the capture of Martinique. Perhaps not surprisingly his large family had a strong military leaning. Three of Edmund's brothers died in the twenties as military officers. Two more survived to become Lt Generals. Two others took Holy Orders. And another, a captain in Royal Fusiliers, seems to have had an inheritance so changed his name.

The sisters were not to be outdone. One married an Anglican priest and another, a barrister; a third chose a soldier who became a Lt General. The other two married slices of Berkshire and County Cork.

Perhaps inevitably Edmund joined the army – in his case the Royal Artillery. He served through the campaigns of the middle of Victoria's reign and became himself a Major General. He married Helen Gzowski the daughter of a Polish count living in Pennsylvania. They had four children – three girls and son. Charlotte their second daughter was born in Montreal. Her younger brother, Bingham Alexander, yet another soldier, who would die at Ypres in 1914, aged 37.

Joseph and Charlotte were married in 1893 and soon had two daughters growing up in their new home: Edith Helen born in 1895 and May Josephine two years later. The Strakers, in common with other members of the family, took the social responsibilities of wealth seriously and became known for charitable works. It is difficult to match the generosity of Joseph after his wife's sudden death from measles in 1917. When on 1st July 1918 he and his elder daughter, Helen, completed the legal formalities which passed Prior House with an endowment to trustees, their wish was that the place be used for the good of the community. That is a wish so amply fulfilled in a century of achievement.

It was Dame Catherine Cookson, a great benefactor of Charlotte Straker, who died 20 years ago, who said:

“Every one of us is the elderly person of tomorrow, and we shall be fortunate if, in our need, we have the Charlotte Straker Hospital...”

As for the Charlotte Straker Trust itself, I might turn to Mary Webb’s introduction to her novel *Precious Bane*, published six years after the establishment of Charlotte Straker Hospital, a book which Dame Catherine must have known:-

The past is only the present become invisible and mute, its memoried glances and its murmurs are infinitely precious. We are tomorrow’s past. Even now we slip away like those pictures painted on the dials of antique clocks – a ship, a cottage, sun and moon, a nosegay. The dial turns, the ship rides up and sinks again, the yellow painted sun has set, and we that were new things, gather magic as we go...

I salute you on making The Charlotte Straker what it is: ‘a much-loved and unshakeable Tynedale institution’. I wish you every success in the future; I feel sure you, too, will gather magic as you go.

Hugh Dixon, MBE, former National Trust Curator for the North East