

Robert Handyside and the Holystone Handasyd Chalice

I was talking to a sheep farmer last night over a pint in a well-known Coquetdale hostelry.

All day the rain had been hammering down and you had to convince yourself that up there, above the leaden sky there was a sun shining brightly.

He'd been 'looking his sheep' in the November bleakness and I agreed with him that a week in the Caribbean might be a nice break.

Three hundred years ago similar thoughts may have been running through the mind of another Coquetdale farmer as he made his way over his land and looked his sheep.

The year was 1713 and a year earlier Gerard's younger brother Thomas had returned from Jamaica. But he hadn't been there for a holiday - he'd been there for eleven years.

The Coquetdale farmer was baptised Gerard Hangingshaw at Holystone in 1640 and, as the eldest son, had inherited the family estate at Harehaugh on the Coquet from his father, also named Gerard. His baptism record does not survive – the mid-seventeenth century was such a tempestuous time it is a wonder that any did: the parish registers of Holystone with Alwinton date from 1696. Fire, plague, regicide and revolution was the backdrop to the brothers' upbringing, although to a family raised in the border marches with tales of the reivers handed down from their grandfather, maybe that didn't faze them too much. You needed to be made of stern stuff just to survive.

The brothers' grandfather Roger Hangingshaw signed his will on the 9th January 1616, leaving the Harehaugh estate to Gerard, his eldest son, and 'burgages' in Rothbury to his three other sons. In those days, typically, the eldest son would inherit the family seat, the second son would go into the army, the third into the church.

The Hangingshaws were long established in the Coquet valley – in 1541 the border commissioners reported that another Roger Hangingshaw (probably the grandfather of Roger) had built a pele "at a place called the hareclewgh" to resist "the Incourse of theves of Ryddesdayle." Apparently he never finished it off due to a shortage of building materials – the building now described as 'Woodhouses Bastle', which stands next to Holystone Grange at a lovely – and defensible – position on the Coquet, was probably cannibalised from an earlier construction.

On the lintel above the door is carved "WP BP TAM 1602". It is thought that the building was finished off by the Potts family – Bartholomew Potts was a witness to Roger Hangingshaw's 1616 will. When I first saw the bastle in the early 1980's it was in a very poor state – the heavy stone flags on the roof had crushed the supports. Fortunately it has been repaired and, although the slates may not be 'original', at least they keep out the rain and do not threaten the structure of the building.

So, while Gerard tended his sheep and looked after his estate – all the while keeping an eye out for the 'theves of Ryddesdayle' or whatever other n'er-do-wells might

threaten, his younger brother Thomas became an officer in the army and set off on a life of adventure that reads like a Hollywood film script.

Thomas joined the army in 1673 – there's no surviving record but Major Thomas writes from Newfoundland in 1697 that he'd "served the King for 24 years". Life in seventeenth century Northumberland had prepared him well for his part in the expansion of the British Empire.

Thomas had been in wars in Flanders and Ireland; he was probably at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and the siege of Namur in 1695. He'd been sent to Newfoundland to keep the French out.

Unfortunately, it was not the French so much as 'General Winter' that nearly did for Thomas – for the second time a lack of suitable building materials interfered with the Hangingshaw's plans. Of the 300 men that overwintered in St John's, 214 succumbed to cold and hunger. His elder brother Gerard, in the relative comfort of Coquetdale, must have worried for him.

Perhaps Major Tom fancied somewhere a little warmer and he didn't take up the recommendation to be Governor of St John's. Instead he boarded a ship out of Kinsale in Ireland and headed south to protect the English possessions in the Caribbean. He arrived in Jamaica in 1701 and this was to be his family's home for the next eleven years. He was accompanied by his Dutch wife, Anna Catharina, and their children.

Sadly, his wife was not to share his life in the sun for very long. There were dangers apart from the Spanish, the French, the pirates and diseases with no name and no cure. In 1704 he writes from St Jago de la Vega, Jamaica; "We have had two or three small earthquakes, but I do not hear of any damage they have done. As to my own particular, I have had the greatest shake I ever could have had, having lost one of the best wives, who has left a numerous family of little ones motherless, she departed this life here Sep. 13".

She was buried in the cathedral in Spanish Town the following day.

Thomas was well rewarded for his bravery and military prowess – he retired to a country seat near Great Staughton in Huntingdonshire but he did not forget his Northumberland roots. In his will of 1725 he left a bequest of fifty pounds to his "loving brother Gerrard".

Gerrard - who lived to the age of 95 - gave three guineas in his will of 1733 "towards the buying of Communion Plate for the Holystone Altar Table". This money paid for the chalice which I am holding.

At some point Thomas and Gerrard Hangingshaw had decided to change the family name to Handasyd – for an ambitious soldier it would be important to have the 'right' name and Hangingshaw was perhaps a little too rustic sounding. Another possible reason for the change of name could have been to put some distance between the family and a calamity which befell the village of Wreighill in 1665. According to David Dippie Dixon, a Miss Handyside opened a package from London; whatever else was in the parcel, it also carried a flea. The hapless young lady was soon struck by the

plague which then wiped out most of the village. I wonder if perhaps her name was actually Hangingshaw? Whatever the reason, within a few years the surname Hangingshaw had died out.

Gerrard was buried at Holystone on November 8th 1735. If his gravestone survives it is not legible. His younger brother, Major General Thomas Handasyd, governor of Jamaica, has a magnificent memorial in the church of St Andrew's, Great Staughton. His sons became Major Generals, MP's, doctors and married into the aristocracy.

The vast wealth of the Major General was frittered away by his heirs on social climbing and, to paraphrase George Best, most of it seems to have been spent on women and fast carriages with the rest squandered.

The Harehaugh estate was passed down in Gerard's will in a rather convoluted way - he had two sons and four daughters but his son Roger predeceased him; his other son Jasper never returned from Jamaica where he died in 1746; and his grandson - also a soldier - died in service on the island of Minorca. Eventually it passed to Gerard's nephew, the thrice married Dr Clifford Handasyd, who probably didn't need the money and certainly would not have given up his life of hobnobbing in eighteenth century London for one in the wilds of Northumberland - he sold it.

On the base of the chalice is inscribed "The gift of Gerard Handasyde to the church of Holystone. Anno dn.1735. Remodelled Anno dn. 1853" (The Victorians loved to remodel and 'improve' artefacts as well as church buildings).

Gerrard's gravestone may no longer survive but his gift to the church does and is still in use three hundred years later.

My connection with all this colourful history is intriguing - my eighth great grandfather was Captain James Handyside of Morpeth. He, like Thomas, became an army officer. Unlike Thomas, his early commission record survives - he was a lieutenant in the Duke of Buckingham's regiment in 1673. By 1688 James is sick and writes his will - this year is the first record of Thomas's military career when he receives a commission as Captain. It would seem that Thomas stepped into my ancestor James' shoes. Or rather James sold his commission to Thomas; James leaves £1300 - quite a sum in those days - to his widow Susannah Davison, sons Robert and James and daughter Elizabeth who was born on the 26th of August 1688. It seems most likely that James and Thomas were cousins or, possibly, brothers.

Rob Handyside