

## ELLEN WEETON, 1776-c.1850

[On 17 March 1949 Professor R. J. A. Berry read to the Society a paper entitled "Small-town life in south-west Lancashire in the days of Miss Weeton". He based his paper upon the two volumes of letters and journals which Edward Hall edited and published through Oxford University Press in 1936 and 1939 under the title *Miss Weeton: Journal of a Governess, 1807-1825*. These fascinating volumes have too long been out of print, and the following extracts from Professor Berry's paper are printed here to show what a rich source of social history is to be found in Ellen Weeton's writings. From 1840 to 1861 Professor Berry's grandfather, John Barlow, was headmaster of Upholland Grammar School, and ninety years ago his mother and his aunt, the Misses Barlow, were the principals of a girls' private school in Upholland, the same village in which Miss Weeton had run her school in the first years of the nineteenth century.]

IN the year 1801 the village of Upholland, wherein Ellen Weeton lived from 1784 until 1806, had a population of about two thousand and five hundred, of whom not more than one in four, if so many, had even the rudiments of education. Of this illiterate population, about one-third or more were unskilled labourers. About another fifth worked at home as cottage weavers. A still smaller proportion were engaged in agriculture, while nailers, masons, carpenters, joiners, cord-wainers, blacksmiths, stockiners, milliners, millers, delftmen, slaters, gaugers, clerks, cobblers, alekeepers, butcher and such-like made up the balance of the population. The remaining few were what would then be called "the gentry", and the parish registers of the period differentiate these from the common folk by the designations of *Mr.* or *Esq.* The medical and legal professions had then no representatives at all in Upholland, though there is record of one doctor at Winstanley and an attorney-at-law in Dalton.

In common with the rest of the country the rate of illegitimacy in and about Upholland was high; higher, indeed, than the average for the whole country. In about the middle of the nineteenth century the proportion of illegitimate births to the total number registered in England ranged from 6.3% to 7%, whereas in Upholland, just before Miss Weeton's time, it averaged 10%. The parish registers of Upholland contain many records of what therein are bluntly termed "bastards". The packed churchyard affords even more striking evidence of the prevalence of illegitimacy in Upholland. There is a lot of history to be gleaned in a churchyard. Even the parish priest was not immune from the current practice of producing bastards, nor did he escape the eagle eye of Miss Weeton. In this respect Upholland was just like most of the other villages of the district, or indeed of any other illiterate community, inasmuch as it was greatly addicted to slander and gossip, and being ignorant was steeped in superstition. Miss Weeton is very outspoken on the

subject. Of the then villagers of Upholland, who were her neighbours, relatives and acquaintances, she tells us that they were an extremely illiterate vulgar set, tiresome in their ignorance, with a wisdom little better than a low cunning. She frequently complains of their petty exhibition of religious intolerance, of their ignorance and brutality, of their immorality and of their gross superstitions. Even her Aunt Barton she describes as an avaricious, scandal-making old woman, and thinks that both she and her husband, living as they do in Upholland are dwelling in a land of stupidity. Nor did distance lend enchantment to the view, for, writing from Beacon's Gutter, Kirkdale, on 23 May 1809, to a Mrs. Whitehead, Miss Weeton said, "Holland is, if possible, more licentious and more scandalous than when I lived in it; such numbers of unmarried women have children, many of whom one would have thought had years, discretion, sense and virtue to have guarded them. In two houses near together, there have been in each, a mother and daughter lying in, nearly at the same time; and one man [the notorious George Lyon] reported to be father to all four". Later George Lyon was hanged at Lancaster for highway robbery, but his body was brought back to Upholland for interment in the crowded graveyard.

Miss Weeton was a well-educated woman, surprisingly so considering the times in which she lived. She had the three R's *in excelsis* and showed a strong predilection for reading and scribbling rhymes. It consequently follows that Miss Weeton held in supreme contempt the extraordinary superstitions with which Holland and the Hollanders were infested. Writing from Upholland in 1807 to Miss Chorley in Liverpool, she declared,

"I have heard, and almost daily do hear about ghosts, visible and invisible—some that let you see them and others that are only to be heard—that if I was not made of more than female soul, I do not know what would become of me. It would be strange indeed if a house like that you describe should be visited by nothing supernatural, when at least a tenth of the houses in this neighbourhood are said to have such guests. Scarcely a field, gate, or stile is without its attendant spirit; and in some of the houses the noises these beings, or shadows, or sprites or whatever they are, are *said* to make, are terrible beyond anything. One, at the Mill-house below Mr. Dannett's is the terror of the whole neighbourhood. . . . Miss D. is superstitious in the *extreme* . . . and will repeat such a long string of the strangest apparitions, horrid yells, looking glasses falling, furniture moving, tongs, shovel and poker dancing, raps at the door or the window, windows being broken without hands of any living creature near, noises as if somebody were spinning, churning, dancing, or a mill going, and many other appalling things not worth writing. Miss Dannett, her niece and Miss Ashcroft from Standish who were present, were so terrified, that, though there were eight or nine in the room, they scarcely dared either to move or sit still".

Miss Weeton is naïve enough to admit that whilst supernatural agency is permitted it is not one of the articles of her faith.

In view of the prodigality with which life seems to have been propagated in the Upholland of Miss Weeton's time it is perhaps fortunate that for those who did survive the undoubted perils of infancy living was singularly cheap. When she left Upholland, Miss Weeton let her cottage to a watch-maker for eight guineas a year

and also bought the cottage next to her for £48. She wrote "it is a wretched hut but will pay good interest as long as it will stand". Lodgings, too, in Upholland were obtainable at singularly low rates. A distant relative of Miss Weeton, Miss Alice Smith, was offered lodgings for a shilling a week, fire and furniture included, and a prospective tenant of the house Miss Smith was then living in offered to give her as much as £5 a year for it. Miss Weeton thought that with a little exertion Miss Smith might easily live very well on the £10 or £12 a year which she had, the more easily as she could also earn another three or four shillings a week by winding bobbins—an obvious reference to the requirements of the cottage weavers. Miss Weeton made the caustic comment that the only reason why Miss Smith wanted money was for the purchase of ale and spirit. If her relations wanted to get rid of her, advised Miss Weeton, they had only to supply her with as much as she would drink and she would soon kill herself.

When Miss Weeton left Upholland in July 1808 she took up her residence in Liverpool and remained there for some sixteen months. Here she naturally expected more intelligent beings than in Upholland but she was grievously disappointed. In 1809 she confided to her Journal,

"When I came to Liverpool I expected to have found it filled with intelligent beings, imagining knowledge to be so generally diffused. I begin to discover that it contains as much proportionate ignorance as any little village in England, where perhaps the curate is the only intelligent man in it. . . . Here, not one in ten can speak their native language tolerably; not more than one in twenty, correctly, and of these last, scarce one-tenth can boast any greater literary acquirement than that of their grammar. I thought myself very ignorant when I came here, expecting to find so many wise, so many learned—I find them not. . . . The people here do not seize the opportunities of improvement that so frequently occur—which they must almost wilfully reject. Their ignorance is astonishing! It would almost appear as if ignorance was taught, as if it were something to boast of. Many intelligent tradesmen may be met with in Liverpool, but generally speaking, those of a similar rank in a little village are equally well informed."

At the time Miss Weeton made these devastating remarks, the population of Liverpool was about 80,000 and the place where she recorded them was Beacon's Gutter. Here she had taken lodgings and from these lodgings she wrote, "If you choose to bathe, you might undress in the house and walk into the water, the tide comes so near. It was a very high tide about a fortnight ago, and it came close to the door. . . . At low water I can frequently see people walking on the Black-rock; and any time on the Cheshire shore if the air is moderately clear. Many people have begun to bathe here. I have been dipping three days this week. I walk out of the house in my bathing dress".

Beacon's Gutter, or Mile-end House, was an isolated farm-house situated at the mouth of a small creek or gutter, opening into the River Mersey about one mile below Castle Street. In Miss Weeton's day it had a solitude and sea-side charm all its own, and at low

water there was a fine stretch of sands which was much frequented by bathers. Miss Weeton herself could enter the water from her own door. To-day the gutter is a sewer and the traveller will have a job to find the ugly and obscure public house known, if it is still there, as *The Cottage*, at the junction of Boundary Street and Derby Road, Kirkdale. The rest are the docks, Wellington, Sandon, and Bramley-Moores, and the slums of the docks. Miss Weeton's discovery of Runcorn as a bathing place was of much later date and as a watering place she admired it more than any she had ever seen, even more than North Meols. She tells us little of it but rather enlarges on the fact that she went to Runcorn by steam packet. This for her, and in those times, must have been an almost incredible experience, for it was only fifteen years after Symington had built the *Charlotte Dundas*—the first practically successful steamboat ever built and intended for towing purposes on the Forth and Clyde canal. Miss Weeton was not at all impressed with this mechanical marvel, for she said these steam packets "make rather a laughable appearance; they go puffing and blowing and beating their sides, and labouring along with all their might". As a prophetess Miss Weeton leaves something to be desired, for she added that it was very unusual for passengers to be sick in a steamboat. Of North Meols Miss Weeton was very fond. Writing in 1808 she said, "It is becoming a famous bathing place and is undoubtedly much superior for that purpose to the Baths at Liverpool. There is no river-water at the Meols, but a fine open sea, spacious shore to walk upon, composed of a firm, smooth sand, and, what suits me exceedingly, I can ramble for miles along the shore when in a humour for being alone, entirely observed and without the least dread of danger". In July 1823, Miss Weeton travelled from Wigan to North Meols by means not now available to us. From Wigan she drove to Appley Bridge by means of a hired cart, Mr. Ball's, a distance of about five or six miles. At Appley Bridge she boarded one of the canal packets which took her to Scarisbrick Bridge about seven or eight miles on. There she found a number of carriages all ready waiting to convey her for the remaining five miles to her destination.

Miss Weeton saw the great Mrs. Siddons on at least two occasions. Once in Lancaster as "*Belvidera*"—but so long ago that "I had almost forgot her"—and once in July 1809, when she and her cousin, Henry Latham, went to an unnamed Liverpool theatre to see, from a very comfortable seat in the gallery, Mrs. Siddon's *Lady Macbeth*. In common with the rest of the audience, Miss Weeton was wonderstruck with the sleep-walking scene. The witches, she thought "seemed to be a merry set, the ghosts so substantial—the theatre and the stage too light to give a sufficiently awful effect to the lightning and thunder (and that was not loud enough) that they must be weak indeed who are for one moment affected by them". Although not mentioned by Miss Weeton, this theatre must certainly have been the Theatre Royal in Williamson-

Square. It was a commodious building of red brick, erected on the north side of the square. It had been rebuilt and re-opened as the New Theatre Royal in 1803, and as such had a long and distinguished career, until it fell on evil days, and in August 1885, was put up for auction, to be eventually bought by the Liverpool Corporation for £23,000. The only other theatre in Liverpool in Miss Weeton's time was the Drury Lane Theatre, first opened in 1749 or 1750. Between 1758 and 1759 it was rebuilt, but ceased to exist some time between 1825 and 1829. The narrow lane called Drury Lane ran between Water Street and Brunswick Street, close to St. Nicholas Church and the Pier head.

Considering the times in which she lived and her comparatively humble circumstances Miss Weeton was a traveller of distinction. She visited Yorkshire, the English Lakes, London, North Wales, including the ascent of Snowdon, many parts of south-west Lancashire and the Isle of Man. She was a prodigious walker, and walked some immense distances. In London she calculated that in the course of her month's sight-seeing she walked  $538\frac{3}{4}$  miles, and the singular accuracy with which she computed the distance to fractions of a mile is characteristic of this remarkable woman. To the Isle of Man she went in a sailing vessel and it took her about a day and two miserable nights to get there, and when she did get to Douglas her opinion of the place was even more devastating than the contempt she had for the intelligence of the Liverpolitans. Writing in August 1812, to Miss Braithwaite, she said, "There are a strange set of beings in that Island, particularly in, and about, Douglas; it is the *wicked* world, and nothing but the *wicked* world in miniature. Mr. Allen, at whose house I lodged, called Douglas, Botany Bay, and the strangers, convicts. Douglas is a nasty, dirty, filthy, scrubby, mean, pitiful, ill-built town".

For an unprotected female travelling alone in the North Wales of 1825 was a hazardous and dangerous business. Miss Weeton had no Welsh and the Welsh no English, yet she even managed to include the solitary ascent of Mount Snowdon, which was then a still more hazardous proceeding.

It is almost unnecessary to state that roads in Miss Weeton's earlier days were about as primitive as in those of the Tudors. Hence, notwithstanding her predilection for walking as her ordinary means of locomotion, she availed herself of any such others as were then possible. One of these, the canal boat, much used in her days, has long since been superseded by more rapid modes of transit. To all indeed who wished to economise money rather than time, the canal packets offered a cheap conveyance from Liverpool and Manchester, as well as on the whole line of the intermediate country. Even so early as 1808, passenger-carrying canal boats plied a daily service between Wigan and Liverpool, the journey taking about nine hours. The average rate of progression, inclusive of stops to pick up passengers, was about four miles an hour, maintained by two towing horses ridden or driven by scarlet-coated boys; when

the wind was favourable, sails were resorted to. In May 1809, Miss Weeton journeyed from Upholland to Liverpool by canal packet boat. As the journey lasted the whole day food was served on board. The cook began her preparations at ten o'clock in the morning, frying bacon, eggs, beef steaks, potatoes, and mutton-chops, roasting meat and warming pies, and did not finish before three or four o'clock in the afternoon. Unfortunately the strong odour of tobacco, spirits, and hot meat, combined with the various smells from the cabin, made many of the passengers sick.

One of her later travel experiences in south-west Lancashire was her first introduction to the new-fangled macadamised road. This was on a journey by Sothern's caravan from Prescott to Liverpool. Miss Weeton said the dust was almost intolerable. "The roads laid on McAdam's plan are better for carriages and easier for draught horses, but for human beings in dry weather, are almost beyond endurance; they are one continual cloud of dust, blinding to the eyes, filling the nostrils, going down the mouth and throat by quantities to suffocation, and completely ruinous to all decent cloathing. Houses by the road are inundated with dust, and all cleanliness destroyed and useless. The fields are so covered on each side, according as the wind blows, that they are of much less value an acre, than those more distant from it". Thus did Miss Weeton anticipate by three-quarters of a century the like complaints made against the first of the motorists.

R. J. A. BERRY.