

Jeremiah Dixon: Dixie and Coal Gas

AN extended footnote in *The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham* (William Fordyce, Newcastle upon Tyne: A. Fullarton & Co., vol. 2, 1857, pp. 78-79) gives interesting information both on one of the constructors of the famous Mason-Dixon Line and on the origin of gaslighting. Jeremiah Dixon, born at Cockfield, County Durham, was clearly a man of many parts. Although lacking public school or university education, he was selected by the Royal Academy of Woolwich to observe, on St. Helena, the transit of Venus across the sun. After success in this assignment, Dixon was employed by the Academy in setting the limits and bounds of Pennsylvania and Maryland.

In a quite different connection, Jeremiah Dixon originated many mechanical contrivances for coalmining and associated work. It has been stated that he was the original discoverer of coal gas, and that his garden wall on the edge of Cockfield Fell was the first place ever to be lighted by that material. This discovery is, of course, generally attributed to William Murdock, and Fordyce states that it is probable that the two men made the discovery simultaneously and that, from Dixon's "residence in an obscure locality, and unostentatious disposition, his discovery did not become known till after that of Murdock. His first experiment is said to have been made—like that of many other embryo philosophers—with rather a crude sort of apparatus; his retort being an old tea kettle; and for pipes, to convey it along an orchard wall, he used the stalks of hemlock."

Dixon was a Friend and died in Cockfield, being buried at a little chapel (*sic*) belonging to the Society of Friends at the village of Old Raby, near Raby Park. The building was pulled down many years prior to 1857 by the Duke of Cleveland, to improve the park and road near Raby Castle, and a dog kennel was built upon its site, so that the grave of this man of genius has neither line nor stone to indicate where his bones are laid. The Victorian writer attributes the neglect of the burial place in a great degree to the peculiarity of Friends in objecting to monuments and tombstones. Although Dixon was a Friend, at least in later life, the

Woolwich Academy which employed him in astronomical surveying work was a military one, and ever afterwards he sported its uniform, a red coat and a cocked hat. We are not told the reactions of his Monthly Meeting or Overseers to this!

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Guide to the manuscript collections. Supplement I, 1956-1962. Extracted from the annual List of accessions to repositories, with additions and index. (Libraries, Art Galleries and Museums Committee.)

1961 accessions includes the following item:

Friends Meeting records

Woodhouse (Sheffield) Meeting: Catalogue and issue register of books belonging to Woodhouse meeting, 1793-1899. [Printed] rules of the Reading Room, 1877 and catalogue of books, 1890; registers of burials in Handsworth Friends Burial Ground, 1883-1909; plans of Friends Burial Ground at Woodhouse, 1887.