

Rural Rides to Catcleugh
George Robson

More immediately to hand were those occasions - not apparently particularly taxing - which combined business with pleasure; the Tyneside meetings of the Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead Gas Company and the Newcastle and Gateshead Water Company. The latter, to his apparent almost childlike delight, occasionally took him to the peaceful attractions of rural Northumberland to the company's Catcleugh reservoir. [1]

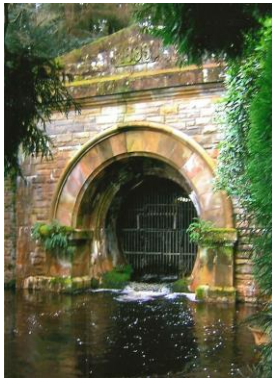
There is no doubt that JMF lived a full life. But as if his responsibilities at Armstrong's, his increasing involvement with Durham Cathedral and his musical, literary and antiquarian interests left spare time, JMF agreed to become director of both the *Newcastle and Gateshead Gas Board* and the *Newcastle and Gateshead Water Board*.

The Water Board directorship came about in 1915 and, with a salary of £100 p.a. and extra payment dependant on attendances, JMF remained in post right through to his death in 1932. During these years a fellow-director (and for three years Chairman) was John Noble with whom JMF was so well acquainted. Board meetings took place monthly and the minutes of these meetings show JMF rarely missed attendance, particularly when his responsibilities with Armstrong's began to wane. Undoubtedly, the highlight of the year for the directors came in June or early July, for it had become a tradition for the venue of one of the summer meetings to be not at the Newcastle company offices but at remote Catcleugh House in the north Northumberland.

The Newcastle and Gateshead Water Company was founded in 1845, with William George Armstrong (later Baron Armstrong) as Secretary. The Company looked north for supplies of water. A rapidly rising population on Tyneside and measures to better the dreadful sanitation arrangements made a significant increase in water supplies urgent. So over the second half of the century six reservoirs in north Northumberland were built: Whittle Dean; Colt Crag; Little Swinburne; East Hallington; West Hallington; and Catcleugh.

As the fourth of these was nearing completion, Thomas Hawkesley, the renowned reservoir and waterworks engineer, drew up proposals for a reservoir in the Rede Valley and these proposals were incorporated into an Act of Parliament obtained by the Company in 1889. This Act authorised the construction of a small Rede Valley reservoir with a part overland and part underground pipeline running from it, the water conveyed to the two existing reservoirs at Hallington. However, after long delays caused by problems with the raising of finance, it was recognised after droughts in both 1892 and 1893, and a reassessment of demand for water in the rapidly expanding industries on Tyneside, that a greater supply of water would be needed. So a further Act in 1894 gave permission for a doubling of the annual yield. Average rainfall at Catcleugh was found to be 36" per annum and the final proposal was for an extraction of 10 million gallons per day - this requiring a reservoir holding 2,000 million gallons.

The death, in September 1893, of Thomas Hawkesley had led to the management of the firm becoming the responsibility of his son, Charles, to whom was also entrusted the design of this larger reservoir - a reservoir that would hold as much water as the Company's five other Northumberland reservoirs put together.



Although envisaged and planned over a number of years, the directors had not thought it possible to construct more than one work at a time and so it was not until the West Hallington reservoir was completed and the financial difficulties resolved that attention shifted to Catcleugh. Such was the magnitude of the task that construction begun in 1894 was not to be completed until 1905.

For the River Rede to exit the reservoir, in 1899 a 500 yards tunnel of 12 feet in diameter was constructed alongside the western end of the 610 yards dam which, on completion, held back the waters which had necessitated the dismantling and relocation of Chattlehope Farmhouse at the expense of the Company. But throughout the entire construction period the full vigour and ingenuity of the Victorians were employed. This

even involved the laying of a fifteen-mile narrow-gauge railway alongside the overland 30 inch water pipeline – key to conveying water away from the reservoir. The railway connected Catcleugh to North British Railways at West Woodburn station and hence to Newcastle and beyond. So, for the Directors, a journey from Newcastle to West Woodburn and then on to Catcleugh could be taken in less than two hours. Even when the Catcleugh branch-line eventually closed it was still possible to get within fifteen miles of Catcleugh by rail.

When construction at Catcleugh was at its height in 1899, there were two hutted communities on either side of the River Rede, one being called *Newcastle* and the other *Gateshead* with the inevitable rivalries. All told there were forty-seven six or seven roomed huts [2], with communities totalling just over 500 men, women and children. In fact, a census record taken in the autumn of 1899 shows 331 men, 79 women and 94 children. There was a hospital, a doctor's surgery, a post office, a canteen, a billiard room, a police



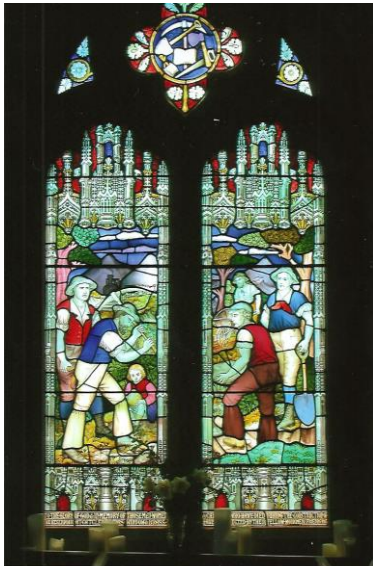
station, a meeting hall to seat over fifty people and a Mission room to seat five times that number. Surprisingly, given the number of children, there was no school on the site, but the older children are known to have attended the school at Byrness less than two miles away.

The Black House (See Footnote 2)

Situated just south of Carter Bar alongside the A68, and only three miles from the border with Scotland, Catcleugh takes its name from the wild cats which until the early 1800s haunted the upper Tyne valleys and from *cleugh*, which is a regional word for *ravine* or *narrow valley*. Remote and wild at any time, in winter Catcleugh can be one of the most inhospitable places in



Britain and the gangs of navvies who built the one-and-a-half mile lake paid a heavy price, as did their families. Near the Tyne bridge at Bellingham is a little plaque at the side of the road. It is directly opposite the Roman Catholic church of St. Oswald's and bears the legend *Irishmen's Graceyard*. It marks the last resting place of an unspecified number of the largely Irish cholera in 1900.



A double set of stained glass commemorative windows in the tiny church of St. Francis at nearby Byrness is dedicated to the 64 fatalities that occurred

as a direct result of the reservoir's construction. They are inscribed: *To the men, women and children who died during the construction of the reservoir at Catcleugh. Erected by their fellow workmen and friends. 1903.* The windows show work men busy with buckets, spades and wheelbarrows and also a small boy refreshing himself with a water bottle. In the middle distance a little steam train is shown chugging along with a line of trucks dancing behind, and beyond that at the very back is a glimpse of the reservoir with hills and sky beyond. The windows were the first in the country to be paid for by subscriptions raised by a workforce and dedicated to a workforce, Byrness becoming a place of pilgrimage for members of trade unions and the labour movement for many years. The windows



were designed and executed by George Joseph Baguley and Son of Newcastle.

Carr's Memorial



In 1904 an adjacent plaque was erected, listing the names of the deceased, the youngest being George Carr, aged twelve, who had been killed by falling into the site's stonecrusher. Young George lies in the churchyard, his grave marked with a bronze cross and plaque beautifully inscribed: *I. M. George Carr. Accidentally killed at Catcleugh June 15th 1901. Erected by his teachers and schoolfellows.*

Receiving national coverage, in 1899 the navvies went on strike for a period, protesting against the introduction of two Ruston- type steam-operated excavators used to lift material from the reservoir bed and moved up to help build the dam. They posed in front of cameras with '*Tried and Not Found Wanting*' painted on their spades.

The Catcleugh railway line kept numerous locomotives busy during the construction of the reservoir. Their names included *Otterburn, Catcleugh, Brigg, Rede, Byrness, Minnie, Pont, Whittle, Bruckless, Ramshope, Heugh* and *Woodburn*. Most of the material for the dam's construction - cement, coal, clay, metal pipes, stone blocks, domestic supplies - were brought to the site by rail. From January 1902 to January 1903 alone 49,000 tons of material were transported along the line to Catcleugh. However, the construction of the railway itself was a major engineering exercise, with numerous streams and burns to be bridge or tunnelled beneath.

An abundance of clay for lining the reservoir had been discovered about eight miles away to the east at Yatesfield, and so a two-mile

long Yatesfield branch line to Catcleugh line was laid, the two joining at Bennettsfield. The whole area is now prohibited to public access, forming part of the Army's Otterburn ranges.

Most of the locomotives were relocated after the completion of the reservoir in 1905 but some were kept on to serve the Upper Rede Valley communities. Amongst the rolling stock was a particularly fine and well-appointed mahogany-lined saloon carriage with three windows on each side and open-ended balconies. It was no doubt in this that the Company directors rattled through the spectacular Northumbrian wilderness on their journeys to and fro from Newcastle and Catcleugh.

At the same time that the construction of the Catcleugh reservoir began in 1894, the Company ordered the building of a mansion house for Charles Hawkesley. Hawkesley's initial design of the mansion was looked upon as too extravagant and only a much reduced proposal got the go-ahead. The mansion was constructed a short walk from the reservoir and was used as Hawkesley's home and also to entertain and accommodate Company visitors and



guests. It remained in the possession of the Company until being sold to a financier in 2005. It had been here that JMF joined the other directors for their annual June/July Board meetings, which were held in an especially constructed meeting hall in the grounds of the house. The meetings were followed by tours of the reservoirs and recreation. No doubt time was found to make good use of the River Rede, with its abundance of freshwater salmon and which flows through the grounds of the house.

Wilfred Cochrane points out in his obituary of JMF: *Field sports had not much attraction for him, though he fished occasionally*. The extensive grounds of Catcleugh House hold a mixture of mature woods, grasslands and formal beds, and the reservoir itself is lined with mixed trees. Beyond these stretched open rolling moorlands which have more recently been largely planted by the Forestry Commission [3]. A very different kind of landscape to those found in the environs of Weymouth or Burford. Study of the minutes of the Board meetings show that the Catcleugh visits were not just 'joyrides' for the directors [4]. Each show reports on the current water levels and degree of extraction for each of the six reservoirs, bacteriological reports, engineers' reports, waste inspectors' reports as well as more minor matters - such, as at the 10th June 1927 meeting, with JMF in attendance:

- + A request from the president of the Colt Crag Reservoir Angling Association, Colonel Bell of Bavington Hall, to keep a boat on Colt Crag reservoir (granted)
- + A request from Reverend Whale of Byrness vicarage for help towards repairing the 'dilapidation to the vicarage' (only £5 donated).
- + A request from Catcleugh House's long-serving caretakers - Mr and Mrs J. Dodd - to retire due to the ill health of both (granted with a £100 per annum allowance).
- + A request from the local council to contribute to the widening of the Allendale road (granted, with the sum to be determined when exact costing known).

The last Board meeting that JMF attended at Catcleugh was held on 30th June 1931 and the last meeting of all that he attended was in Newcastle on 22nd September 1931. The minutes of 26th July meeting begin:

Before proceeding with the ordinary business of the meeting the Chairman made feeling reference to the death, which took place on 22nd inst., of Mr John Meade Falkner who had been director of the Company for the past sixteen years. The Secretary was instructed to write a letter to Mrs Falkner expressing the sympathy and condolence of the Directors in her sad bereavement.

JMF's death ended an association between Armstrong's and the Water Board which had stretched back to 1845. William Armstrong himself had served as Company Secretary then Director and finally

as Chairman; and later both Andrew and John Noble had spells as Chairman.

Catcleugh was the Company's showpiece reservoir, its mansion house offering facilities for meetings as well as accommodation. It was also the only one of the six that was directly accessible by rail, this at a time when the present A68 road into Scotland was little more than a muddy track. There can be no doubt that these sorties into Northumberland, mixing business and pleasure, would be invigorating to both the bodies and souls of the directors. Annual breaks to be anticipated and enjoyed with, in JMF's case at least, '*almost childlike delight*'.



[1] Kenneth Warren: *John Meade Falkner in Durham (1899-1932). A perspective on a small cathedral city*

[2] One single-storied wooden cabin, built c.1891 to house some of the workers still stands below the dam. Known as The Black House, it escaped demolition after construction work finished, being retained for use as an office and tool store. It is the only survivor of the shanty towns, *Newcastle* and *Gateshead*, which faced each other across the River Rede.

The cabin was 'discovered' in 1987 and restored in 1991. It is now used as the reservoir's visitor centre, with displays depicting living and working conditions, including period interiors and furnishings, original tools and Company records. It is a Grade 2 listed building.

[3] The area immediately surrounding the reservoir is designated a *Local Wildlife Site*. It is surrounded by plantations of Scots pine and Norway spruce with much birch and beech interspersed between. Botanists from far and wide arrive to seek out the myriad of plant species that grow from the dam wall itself or from the boulders beneath - the ox-eye daisy, orange hawkweed, ribwort plantain, lady's mantle, lady's bedstraw herb robert, self heal and wild thyme are examples. Away from the dam wall are large areas of swamp vegetation between the numerous meanders in the River Rede, and here also reed grasses, lesser pond sedge, corn mint and marsh horsetail are found in abundance.

The higher moorland slopes are protected as *Sites of Special Scientific Interest*, partly because of the variety of heathers and grasses but also because of the wildlife. Golden plover, dunlin, sandpipers, the ring ouzel, wheatear, windchat are found plus, higher up, osprey and buzzards. Occasionally and increasingly golden eagles have been spotted. The uplands woods harbour long-eared owls.

Amongst mammals, the otter is increasing in numbers quickly as otter-friendly measures are taken in the management of the watercourses, providing an excellent habitat. One of the last refuges of the red squirrel is here in the Rede valley, and firm measures are taken to preclude the greys. There are, of course, many foxes, badgers and deer.

[4] Minutes of the Board meetings and other Company records are held in the archives of the Discovery Museum, Newcastle.

N.B. *The Newcastle and Gateshead Water Company* still exists, although in 1992 it became known as *North East Water PLC* and in 1996 as *The Northumbrian Water Group PLC*.

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- Warren, K. *John Meade Falkner in Durham (1899-1932) A perspective on a small cathedral city* (The John Meade Falkner Society Journal Number 4, July 2003)
- Rennison, R.W. *Water to Tyneside - A History of the Newcastle and Gateshead Water Company* (Northumberland Press Ltd., 1979)
- Minute Books of the Newcastle and Gateshead Water Company, held at the Discovery Museum Archives, Material held at the Black House Visitor Centre, Catcleugh Reservoir, Northumberland Tilley, Brian



Life on the line at Catcleugh (The Hexham Courant, Friday 15th December, 2006)

The Meeting House in the grounds of Catcleugh House

JMF letter to Miss Noble on July 12th 1923: *I was up at Catcleugh yesterday, just under The Carter. It is where the Water Company have their great Reservoir, in the loneliest country imaginable, of boundless green hills and vallies [sic]. We have a rather nice Waterworks-house there, and hold an annual meeting there. Yesterday, as we sat in front on a little terrace, I watched two broods of herons being fed in a little spinney across the valley. The Parent Birds were flying in and out with all the tireless energy of sparrows..*