

John Kibble

Speech made by Tony Cooper at the Blue Plaque ceremony

Antiquarian, Author, Family Man, Photographer, Punt Proprietor, Stonemason, Sunday School Teacher, Wesleyan Chapel Trustee.

John Kibble was all of these and more. Born in Finstock in 1865 and living here at Stratford House during his early years, he went on to write three really important books on the local history of the Wychwood region.

Now it wasn't possible to fit all of those on the lovely Blue Plaque so I'll concentrate on three aspects of his life: his early years in Finstock, something about his work as a stonemason, and of course talk a little about his three books.

So what sort of village was John living in during the 1860s and 1870s?

The railway passed by in the valley in 1853, the forest of Wychwood was disafforested in 1857, a new school was built in 1861 and the fields were finally enclosed in 1862.

Through the 1860s and 1870s we can see Finstock as a largely self-sufficient village with agriculture providing the bulk of jobs for men either in the local estates or on a small scale as landowners. For women, glove-making was a key occupation with most families taking in work and there were links within families through intermarriage.

There was a strong Nonconformist flavour to the village. The Methodist Chapel was built in the centre of the village in 1840, two years before the Anglican church which is on the outskirts.

John Kibble writes of his early life here in Stratford House with enthusiasm.

All life centres for me about a little cottage at the foot of the Well Hill, Finstock and the 'Bottom' there; our neighbours; their doings, dress, sayings and ways.

Hey! But it is a pleasant picture. What splendid companions I had, what rare times the different play places witnessed in those happy days!

His time at school in Finstock was, by his own account, intermittent. He admits that he was a 'sickly boy' and was often running errands for villagers. He would walk through Cornbury Park on the way to Charlbury to collect medicines, and took great enjoyment from the open air – 'Bird, leaf, and tree'.

So, an early indication of his interest in the natural world and an opportunity to escape the classroom.

John's father, William, was a travelling stonemason and quite quickly it became clear to John that he would follow in these footsteps. The 1881 census lists John as an apprentice stonemason, he was just sixteen, and had probably started to learn the trade from the age of thirteen. School days were soon over.

Together, they would leave the village on Sunday evening and stay in digs near their work for the following week.

He writes:

At Kingham I spent a winter, staying at Mrs Bricks, and I got to know the feel of the place pretty closely.

I should add that throughout his books he rarely mentions anyone by their proper name. Mrs Bricks was a made-up name and probably taken from the job he was doing at the time; chopping stone for houses or chimney building. He protects his subjects rather too well and it can be frustrating if you are trying to identify someone today.

He writes of his time at Stratford House in glowing terms; quite literally:

When I was a lad my father brought from Abingdon a paraffin lamp one Saturday when he walked home for the weekend. He was working at Culham church. I believe it was the first lamp in a cottage in the Bottom at Finstock, and was much admired. Before that mother used to sit and sew by hand the long seams of the vast skirts worn in those Victorian days by candlelight. I can see the snuffers as they lay in their tray on the table now.

Life was full of interest in our village.

The Postman blew his tin horn in the evening as he entered 'The Bottom' coming down Plough Lane from Ramsden. Letters had to be taken to him.

The carpenter's workshop to see and sometimes a pair of pit sawyers to watch.

A big old cider mill with a ponderous revolving stone travelling round and round in a circular trough as a horse walked round.

His work as a stonemason took him to the border villages around Wychwood and it is in these places that he gleaned observations, artefacts, documents and stories as he travelled. All of this would go into his books.

As a child Roy Townsend remembers John talking to the children in the village about his finds and often had small items in his pockets to show an eager audience.

By the age of nineteen John was a committed Wesleyan Methodist and began to preach, and this calling would become an important part of his life.

One path he decided not to follow was any involvement in the Finstock Friendly Society of which his father was an active member. I suspect he had witnessed the effects of drink on villagers and decided to abstain for the rest of his life.

What did John leave for us to discover?

Well, his three books of course are the most obvious. He published them himself, no mean feat for a poorly educated man although I suspect he went to night school to catch up.

They offer glimpses of local life going back the eighteenth century and form a very useful source for local historians today. They were never meant to be academic monographs; they are chatty, part anecdotal but with some documentary evidence. He published them in his later life in the 1920s. He offers few references.

We do know that his grandfather, also William, was the licensee of The Crown Public House in the village. From the 1820s he took *Jackson's Oxford Journal* – A fine newspaper of the day – and it is often quoted in the books.

There is also mention of his grandfather's manuscript. Now lost ... but I will continue searching for it!

I had the good fortune to locate and visit John's family home in Charlbury.

He married Florence, a local girl, and they had three children – Florrie, William, and Kathleen. The house was empty when I visited in 2011 and about to be sold. I explored the very large grounds and discovered several statues amongst the overgrown shrubbery. Queen Victoria on a pedestal peeping out from a large Hebe.

In the shed was a selection of stone carving tools – John's tools awaiting discovery. An old punt pole was hanging up. Thankfully, some of could be rescued and are now in Charlbury Museum alongside other items – coins and arrow heads that he donated during his lifetime. Woodstock Museum also holds some of his Roman finds. In his time he had a number of sheds and even a railway carriage to house his finds.

I was lucky enough to find his wooden handcart which he used to transport his work. I know it was his as it has his name painted on one side. He also left us many stone carvings. Many of these are in local churchyards and gardens awaiting discovery.

So, I'll end with the sign-off that he uses at the end of his books:

Farewell, gentle reader.

Thank you.