Craven Herald & Pioneer

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From poverty in the Irish potato famine to a fortune in quarrying

John Delaney was an Irishman, born in 1846 during The Hungry Forties, when – with the failure of the potato crop – people either starved or emigrated. John's eldest sister, Anne, settled the family in Cheshire. John, restless, found employment in the Christie Mill at Settle. He left when the manager took exception to him trading around the district. Delaney then launched a coal business with a horse and cart, plus £40 borrowed from a Quaker banker living in Sheffield.

Delaney's interests extended mightily both to coal and lime, the latter, quarried in the Craven Dales, helping to meet the need of burgeoning steel mills at Sheffield. Eventually, 1,000 private railway wagons bore the name Delaney in bold white lettering.

Dr Bill Mitchell, of Giggleswick, has been fascinated by Delaney and his lime quarries for many years. Some of the tales he relates came from Wilf Johnson, a fitter at the old-time Threshfield quarry.

By 1870, John Delaney, an Irishman with a restless manner, had become an overseer at Christie's Mill at Langcliffe. At the age of 24, he married Annie Calver, a Lancashire weaver, aged 21. (She got her engagement ring ten years late). They had a daughter called Carrie, who would prove to be a worthy businesswoman and who would control a thriving business on the death of her father.

The mind of Young Delaney was stirred by some of the special needs of a new industrial age. He left Christie's Mill at Langcliffe when the manager said: "Work for us or work for yourself."

Delaney bought a local shop and, leaving his wife Annie to a frugal life of shopkeeping and the care of their young daughter, Delaney went off to Manchester University to study geology.

Quarry Tales: Ingleborough Dales

EXAMPLE

The opening of the Settle-Carlisle railway had brought supplies of coal to Settle. Delaney, who had memories of the line's construction in the 1870s, purchased a horse and cart with £40 advanced by a Quaker banker in Sheffield.

Doubtless, the banker led him to think of exploiting the limestone of the Craven district by opening up quarries and transporting lime by rail to what had become the Steel City.

University studies having given him an insight into the nature of the limestone that was so abundant in the dale-country, Delaney included quarrying in his major commercial activities.

Irish-born John Delaney, who made his fortune in Craven

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Quarry Tales: Ingleborough Dales

EXAMPLE

Beecroft Quarry was developed near Horton-in-Ribblesdale. John Winskill built him a stone kiln. At first, Delaney brought lime-burners from Scotland. They did not come up to his expectations, so he recruited men from Derbyshire, another prime quarrying area.

He created an imposing quarry at Threshfield in Wharfedale. Not everything fitted in with his commercial vision. An impressive Hoffman Kiln owned by the Craven Lime Company at Langcliffe – Delaney was a director though played no active part – was worked until production costs, notably the cost of manpower, became excessive.

In due course, he owned a vast number of railway wagons, many bearing his name in bold white letters. Delaney's outlook on life was transformed in 1876 when he became a devout Quaker. Henceforth, his religious convictions were evident in all he said and did.

I had a special insight into John Delaney through the memories of my old friend Wilf Johnson, who

lived in Settle during the latter part of a long life.

Wilf had been a fitter, first employed at Threshfield quarry in 1918. He recalled Delaney's wagon repair depot at Beecroft when it was operated by two blacksmiths, four joiners and a wheel-turner named Samuel Hickling, who had been trained at the Midland works in Derby.

Delaney – Wilf recalled – was of medium build, broad, with a white beard and a conspicuous nose, down which he tended to talk. He usually arrived at his quarry in an old, chauffeur-driven Renault, one of the first cars in the district.

William Barwick was his chauffeur for over 40 years. Delaney had a buoyant walk, usually swinging his walking stick. He was strict but fair with his workers, asserting that they worked with him rather than for him.

Quarry Tales: Ingleborough Dales

EXAMPLE

When a Threshfield quarryman invited him to “look at my shirt; it’s wet through”, Delaney replied: “My shirt’s always wet.” He detested dawdlers, saying: “If two dogs start fighting, the men want time off to go and watch them.”

A quarryman who asked for leave of absence on a Saturday morning hastened to explain: “I’m getting married that day. And I’d like to be there.” Needless to say, leave was granted. It was almost entirely handwork.

A veteran quarry worker I met at Horton in 1953 had started work in 1900 as a labourer, earning four and a half pence an hour. In those days, drills used to pierce the rock to hold the explosives were hand-operated. They penetrated the quarry face for about 26 feet. There was never a strike at Beecroft.

Delaney – bluff and good-natured – was most approachable, interested not only in each workman but in some cases being well-known to their families as well.

Delaney loved his home and strove to be there every night. His marriage endured. Carrie, his daughter, was for years her father’s “right-hand man” in the business sense.

Delaney had no sons. Carrie became his heir and attended to his books. He was so fond of Carrie that he discouraged any young man who approached her with wedlock in mind. She never married.

In the 1890s, his home was a big new house called Overdale. It backed on to the railway at Settle. Delaney had a habit of timing traffic, both crack expresses and slow, stopping trains. If, as in bad weather, the Scottish express was late, he would rouse the household, as early as 4am.

Another of Delaney’s whims was to have water for Overdale drawn from a spring at the Horton quarry and, daily, transported to Settle by rail. He preferred this water to that which came through the town’s taps! Delaney paid reasonable wages, explaining that “I’d like my men to make plenty of money… if so, they’re making plenty of money for me!”

During slack periods, men were not laid off; they were given other work, such as painting. When there was a shortage of ready cash at Beecroft Quarry, he borrowed money from the Swinbanks, a local family, to pay the men’s wages.

Not all his ventures were successful. I remember visiting Threshfield with Dr Arthur Raistrick and others. We were interested in what remained of the colliery Delaney attempted to establish, not far from his huge limestone quarry. The moorland on which shafts were to be sunk was boggy and instead of showing a profit, this venture – unlike the others initiated by Delaney – was not open for long and made a considerable loss.

Delaney died in 1921, from the sudden onset of pernicious anaemia, for which there was no-known medical cure. Interment occurred in the grounds of the Quaker Meeting House at Settle. The lad from poverty-stricken Ireland, who made his fortune in about 15 years of lively business activity, breathed his last in his mid-seventies. There was a Quaker touch in his will. Each of his workers received the sum of £5.

Bill Mitchell, Gigglewick with Wilf Johnson, fitter from Threshfield

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