

Diary of a Studley Gentleman

The Private Journal of Rowland Hill, Needlemaker of Studley & Ipsley 1847-1849

After developing a close working relationship on Studley's Village Hall Needle Heritage Project in 2017, Show & Tell Publications launched with the updated version of 'Needle Making in Studley – Transformation of a Small Craft Industry' by well-known Studley historian, Arthur Cooke. Lisa McNee, living in New Zealand and researching her English 'Hill' family with a 'Redditch needle factory' connection spotted the book advertised on the Internet and immediately got in touch. So began the story....

Lisa's family tree research had led her back to the brothers Rowland & Jabez Hill in Warwickshire's Studley area and we were able to tell her that the 'Redditch needle factory' she sought had been Messrs J&M Mills of Ipsley. Much of Lisa's key information had come from a collection of family effects, made up of all the usual items like a family bible, photographs, postcards and other pieces of ephemera which her father Neil had inherited from his uncle Alfred 'Jum' Hill, of Whangarei. In a fortunate stroke of serendipity, nestling amongst these family treasures was a hand written diary: "The diary has sat in my great Uncle's box of possessions probably since around 1956 when his Granddad died. I doubt anyone read it: I was probably the first one." Several pages had been torn out from the back of the diary, but those for the period 1847-1849 remained intact.

Lisa had begun transcribing and had concluded that it had been written by Mary Hill, wife of Jabez Hill. Jabez was known to us as a beacon of the Studley Baptist Church, so we jumped at the chance to take a look at it for ourselves; Lisa sent us a copy of the diary, hoping that a more familiar local eye would find the transcription easier. The package arrived in June, closely followed in July by Lisa herself, with her daughter and parents on an extended holiday tour.

Lisa's parents, Julia & Neil travelled to Studley for the day to meet us and to see where the family had emigrated from. They brought with them other items from the inherited family collection, in the hope that these might complement the diary and help us shed more light on their family roots. We had made a good start in preparation for their visit and a little advance research revealed that Jabez Hill had at one time lived at 'Glenthorne', in Station Road.

A visit to the Parish Church revealed further family connections, where burial records led to the resting place of Jabez, Mary and others in a peaceful corner of churchyard.

Leaving everything in our hands, many, many hours of painstaking transcribing of the beautiful copper plate hand writing and research ensued. Although simply recorded, many of the entries were obviously written up some time later than the events they record, others were expanded by overwriting on top of the original script; yet others refer to matters outside of our personal experience. All of this made transcribing and understanding the diary challenging to say the least.

Challenging, but so rewarding, especially when something mulled over and over suddenly became clear, as so often happened. Several words and phrases had us scratching our heads longer than others, but after persevering we finally solved these conundrums to get all 30 pages transcribed. Most importantly, their content revealed that the author of the diary was not Mary Hill after all, but was in fact her husband's brother, Rowland Hill.

It was evident to us that this unassuming and simple account of the comings and goings of local people provided an amazing snapshot in time, so we buckled down to painstakingly unpick each entry, researching and revealing what could be found about the events and

people mentioned on its pages. This book is the result of that work, serving to expand an unprecedented contemporary record of the life and times of mid-Victorian Studley: we hope you'll enjoy our efforts and find it as interesting to read as we did to work on.

This diary runs over some three years, from the start of 1847 until August 1849. Sadly there is no introduction by the author and so we have no clue as to whether there were other volumes written before or after it; we have just these thirty pages with which to reconstruct a snapshot of Rowland Hill's life and times, in and around Studley. To the outside world, Studley and its environs had become a single geographical area under the umbrella of 'Redditch' to many at this time, so as another diary researcher observed, "just knowing who they met and interacted with fleshes out (past) lives that little bit more".

Rowland's entries are in essence very simple statements of fact. He recorded events and interactions that had a bearing on his life and community, but his opinions and emotions were generally not shared. Except, that is, for entries that chart his courtship and early days of marriage to his first wife, Ann Hamnett. He was obviously very much taken by her from the outset, as a recently discovered printed love note, a poem written by Rowland to Ann as early as 1845 underlines. This only came to light as we completed our research, but we were so pleased to have verification that we had interpreted his feelings for her accurately. The diary entries which mention Ann hint at the tenderness he felt towards her and provide our very slight glimpse of Rowland the man. His beloved wife Ann died early in 1850, during or shortly after giving birth to their son William Henry. Baby William did not survive his mother for long either and is buried with her in Studley Baptist churchyard. Clearly the missing pages would have covered a most painful period for Rowland. If he was the destroyer, her loss after so short a time together, could explain that action.

We know that Rowland found happiness again later though, since in 1859 he married Emma Morgan and raised a family with her. Could it have been then that he decided to remove all references to his earlier loss and pain? Or was it perhaps Emma who was the destroyer, deciding to exorcise her predecessor's ghost? Could it even have been a jealous Rowland Jnr, Emma and Rowland's son, who took the diary with him to New Zealand?

There is a clue in the text that might point to this: on page 14 of the diary, the entry for October 1st 1847 announces the marriage of Thomas Lane and Elizabeth Davies, but this is crossed out and overwritten with what COULD be another hand, suggesting that someone else read and then 'edited' the diary. Was it that person who, perhaps in response to their own pain at discovering what was in them, removed and destroyed those last pages? We can never know.

We can, however, deduce a little more about Rowland from the things he chose to record. His association with the Baptist Church and its early development, his leisure interests and extensive circle of friends and acquaintances from a wide range of religious communities in Studley, Birmingham and Alcester, all point to a moral and open minded man of deep spirituality. Not surprisingly, throughout the diary more tragic than joyous events get his attention, speaking louder to him as more worthy of his concern and prayers.

The book is available from Karen Cording for £5.00 plus postage.

Please contact Karen on 01527 69150 or karencording@hotmail.com

for further details of how to obtain your copy.