

## HARRY READ (1848-1928)

### Introduction

*By Joe Scott based mainly on notes by JC Robinson, Headmaster of Staveley School 1924-1955, who knew Harry personally.*

Harry Read, bobbin-turner, organist and choir-master, was a notable product of Victorian Staveley. His father Miles Read was the local Surgeon and Apothecary and in 1851 they lived in Main Street next to the Fat Lamb Inn (now Cross House). Miles was in effect the local GP, but this does not mean that he was an outsider of superior education and social status. Born in Kendal in 1804, he probably had some qualification from the Society of Apothecaries, but in his day the professionalisation of medicine was only beginning. Miles was essentially a craftsman who could set or amputate broken limbs and dispense common drugs. His wife died in 1850 leaving him with five children including Harry aged two. Drunkenness was a serious problem in the Staveley of the 1850's and Miles often drowned his sorrows at the Fat Lamb leaving the children to look after each other - the eldest Mary Jane, was nine. "He [Harry] was neglected at home and received very little schooling; it is said that he early made use of a very good voice by singing for coppers in the Fat Lamb and the Eagle and Child," commented J.C. Robinson.<sup>1</sup>

There was a lively musical tradition in our area at this time. Fiddlers played at local dances and a flute band provided music in the church before the first organ was installed in 1852<sup>2</sup>. Brian Bowness, bobbin-turner and Parish Clerk, led the singing from the "singing pew" in the three-decker pulpit, and probably organised a choir, as well as "Messrs Bowness's string band" which played at dances. They even played at an evening lecture on "The Starry Heavens" in the school, when "by glee and music a most agreeable evening was brought to a conclusion."<sup>3</sup> So it is not surprising that Harry living just beside the church, was drawn into its music. It seems likely that he learned somehow to play a fiddle or a flute and 1864 when a pipe organ was bought for the church, Harry, aged 16 was one of those taught to play it by Mrs Chaplin the Vicar's wife.

Some time before this, the Read family had broken up and the three boys Grosvenor, Harry and Fleming had been taken in by William Bethom of Ings Mill. The 1861 census shows them as apprentice bobbin-turners, aged 16, 13 and 12 living in the mill with Bethom and his

family, a domestic servant, four adult bobbin-turners and three other apprentices. The mills worked a twelve-hour day at this time, but stopped at lunch-time on Saturday, so Harry had time to go on with his music. Ings church about this time acquired an organ, and Harry was so successful as organist that in 1865 he was presented with a silver watch.

### Presentation to Harry Read

**About eighty of both sexes sat down to a very elegant set-out of wines, fruit-cakes and Christmas pies... to do honour to a young man (in the employment of Mr. Bethom) who is organist of Ings Chapel, to present him with a handsome silver watch and appendages, which has been subscribed for by ninety of the chapelry of Ings, none being solicited out, The Chairman congratulated him on the good opinion his neighbours had of him, and he hoped the watch would ever remind him "A good name is better than riches." On the case of the watch was engraved, "Presented to Henry Read Organist of Ings Church, December 23rd. 1865."**



*Harry in 1926. Photo by JC Robinson. Notice the silver watch chain - "a silver watch and appendages" Westmorland Gazette 30 12 1865*

Harry still kept up his connection with Staveley church, and with its musical life. In 1870 for instance he "led the choir in a most efficient manner" in a Christmas service, and he and his

brothers sang “The Bailiffs Daughter” at a ‘Penny Reading’ in the schoolroom. In 1875 he played the introduction and a voluntary on the organ in St James’s Church and conducted a choir of 25. In 1887 he was a member of an orchestra of 3 violins, flute, euphonium, cornet, drum, bugle and two harmoniums which gave a fund-raising concert for the Queen’s Jubilee.<sup>4</sup>

When he ended his apprenticeship as a bobbin-turner, Harry moved into lodgings opposite the church in Ings and in the 1871 census we find him there with his younger brother, Fleming. Their father Miles the surgeon now aged 67, lodged next door - perhaps Harry and Fleming, both in good employment, were helping him. In 1881 Harry was still in the same lodgings and Miles presumably was dead. Then in 1884 Harry bought a plot in Danes Row and built himself one of the new and fashionable owner-occupied houses being organised there by the “Staveley Near Kendal Building Society.”<sup>5</sup> It seems likely that he had been saving with the Society for some years. He also married about this time a farmer’s daughter, Ruth Herdson of High Reston, and in 1891 lived in no.13 Danes Row with Ruth, their son John aged three, and Ruth’s father, John, retired farmer aged 63. It was probably at this time that Harry also moved from Ings Mill to Chadwick’s (later the Staveley Wood Turning Company) in Staveley village, where he continued to work as a bobbin-turner until he retired. He stayed in 13 Danes Row till his death in 1928. J C Robinson reports meeting in 1969 an old bobbin worker who had worked alongside Harry as a young man and had also sung in Harry’s choir: “I’ them days it was a choir: yeh hed ta ga ta t’practices an’ twice er a Sunda’ - er else yeh war oot!”

For many years Harry played the organ on Sundays at all three local churches, Ings, Kentmere and Staveley. He kept on with his musical work until quite literally, the day of his death, Sunday 13th May 1928. Then aged 80, he remarked to the vicar in the vestry before Evensong, “I’s happy ta neet. Aw ‘lads is in their plaaces”. Soon after the service began he dropped dead at the manual of his organ.

Harry was of course, a dialect speaker as was virtually everyone in the Staveley he knew as a lad - the schoolmaster then was from Burneside, the doctor from Kendal and the curate from Longsleddale. Even in 1881 95.4% of the population of the Staveley/Kentmere/Ings area

had been born in what is now Cumbria, and so spoke kindred dialects. J C Robinson, on whose notes much of what we know about Harry Read depends, was also a Cumbrian and was a student and a lover of the local dialects, though with his background as an officer in the Indian Army, this was not his normal speech. Headmaster of Staveley School from 1924 - 1955, he particularly enjoyed Harry’s earthy directness. In an age when the wealthier classes tended to speak posh”, and when there was an increasing influx of off-comers into the area, there was something in Harry’s self-assured independence of both speech and attitude that spoke of an earlier and more self-reliant local community.

The following examples of Harry’s speech and the poem by J C Robinson on the next page are all taken from JCR’s notes in the possession of the Society.

### Harry speaks

*At a meeting of the Parochial Church Council discussing storage of an old Pulpit being removed from the Church:*

“Wya Mr. MacConnel [the Vicar], ye’ll hey a bit o’ room in what used ta be t’steeable at t’Vicarage...keep it [there] an’ practice a bit: ye can dew wi’ it!”

*On sermons:*

“Nobbut a poorish sermon today, Mr MacConnel, what a cud a dun as weel misel’: it was nobbut a chapter out o’t’ Acts telt rayther different. Folks needn’t cum ta church fer that! The can git it oot o’t’ Bible fer thersels, if th’ nobbut hev a mind! Tell us summat as we ca’t fin oot fer oorsels.”

“Think on noo Mr. MacConnel, cut it short, cut it short!”

*When giving a rolling pin as a wedding present to a young woman who worked beside him in the mill:*

“Think on thoo uses it t’reet way!” *Meeting her on her return from the honeymoon:* “Noo mi lass, hes ta used it on ‘im yit?”

*To J C Robinson at the funeral of JC’s predecessor as Head of Staveley School:*

“We’ll want anudder scheulmaister; ye man put in for it. Ther’s nea playce like Staavla; if ye’ve nobbut wshed yer hands theear yance ye’ll want ta cum back, ah’ll apod ye! (*‘He put it more crudely than that really, in Chaucerian terms’ comments JCR.*)

## Harry Read

*By J.C.Robinson 1958, Revised 1968.*

“Remember before God  
His faithful servant  
Henry Read; for sixty two years  
Organist of this church  
And for long at Ings and Kentmere also,  
Who died at Evensong  
At the organ he loved,  
13th May 1928, aged eighty.”

So runs a tablet on the southern wall  
Of Staveley Church; by choir and people placed,  
That all who come may know, in after years,  
Of one who in his generation shone  
As beacon light, pointing the surest way —  
The trod to Christ, his Master, Lord of Life.

Son of a Staveley surgeon, Harry Read  
First saw the light in eighteen forty eight.  
The sun he now beheld shone on a spot  
Serene, secure, which tramp of Rome had heard  
In days long past - Staveley - both then and still  
Fair England's heart, where whirring water-  
wheels,  
By Gowan and by Kent, twin lakeland streams,  
Turned ceaselessly to give their power to lathes  
Where men turned bobbins for the cotton-trade.

As boy to man advanced, the constant voice  
Of swiftly running waters filled his soul;  
Where Kent's strong stream, o'er Chadwick's  
dam raced on  
To Ayland's foot. Here Gowan's quiet beck  
Joined hands and chatt'ring cheer'ly each to each,  
Fast on, through Kendal town they sped until  
The estuary was won, then Morecambe Bay.  
And Harry's soul the music of these streams  
Stored up to pour it forth in later years,  
With all his heart and soul in Staveley Church.

As time moved on and Staveley richer grew  
Apprentice into bobbin-turner merg'd  
Whilst Chadwick's trade with Paisley grew apace,  
Gross upon gross of bobbins filled the sheds,  
As shavings smoothly sweet and sawdust fine,  
Mound young Harry's feet piled up and up.  
But Hany's day was lightened by the thought  
Of music to be practised; chants to learn  
For Sunday's services in Staveley Church.  
His sixteenth birthday saw him proudly sit,  
Installed as organist. For skill of touch  
And talent rare combined had brought to him  
With speed that “Fair and Glorious Gift of God”  
Which he for years to come would freely give

To all who cared to lend ‘the hearing ear.’  
Now Harry played as though each chord he  
touched  
Were echo of God's own sweet voice ringing  
From chancel, on to nave and oaken roof,  
To fill His House with heavenly harmony.

So grew his skill and others sought him out  
To play for them at Sunday services.  
Each Sabbath morn the organ seat at Ings  
He filled; each Sunday afternoon he strode  
To Cuthbert's yew-tree'd shrine in Kentmere  
Vale.  
Come sunshine, hail or rain, come frost or flood  
Harry was there to lead in psalm and hymn.  
Then five miles back, past Kent Mere's ancient  
bed,  
Grey Millrigg farm, and home of Celtic clan,  
Fell Foot, now Jopson's Mill, and Barley Bridge,  
Along Brow Lane Danes Road to well-earned tea!

But not to rest! His dearest service now  
Claimed him at Staveley Parish Church, where he  
Helped train a choir of girls and men and boys,  
(A choir by none excelled in Westmorland).  
This Sunday offering, Harry's Day of Rest,  
Brought him no easeful hour but rather gave  
That peace which comes to those who tasks fulfil.

Year in, year out for well nigh forty years  
The triple round went on. Some fourteen miles,  
On foot through Britain's loveliest countryside,  
Each Sunday, on his sacred mission bent,  
Trudg'd Harry (musing as he went his way,  
On...Time...Eternity...on bird-song sweet,  
“As it was in the beginning is now”...  
And kindred themes with native humour blent.)

The ever-rolling stream of time moved on,  
Till seventy Christmases had come his way.  
Some said, “He's past it; some, He needs a rest.”  
But still the work went on and he bade fair  
To teach the grandsons of the boys who sang  
In his first Staveley choir when all was young!  
Each Sunday saw him still at Staveley Church  
At Evensong (though Kentmere now and Ings  
Had other organists but none so skilled  
And staunch as he, nor in their worshipping,  
By half nor quarter near so full of zeal).

Come nineteen twenty eight, thirteenth of May,  
The choir stalls full of singing men and boys;  
(A gladsome sight to Harry's dimming eye)  
A service rich wit sound, and full of joy,  
And thanksgiving for all our Maker's ways!  
Then as the psalm reach'd its triumphal end,  
In great crescendos pealing forth God's praise,

Old Harry's spirit from his body sped  
As he fell forward on the keyboard white  
And joined the ranks of the Celestial Choir  
Whose music is the gladness of the world.  
A better passing could he scarce have wished;  
His cup of joy full filled and brimming o'er;  
He at the keys; his choir fully voiced;  
The 'Triumph Song of Heaven' to greet him well  
As 'trumpets sounded on the other side.'

Along Brow Lane...past farm and vicarage,  
Slowly, but with some pride, his choirmen sad  
Bore on a hurdle-gate, all that remained  
Of their old organist, his wish fulfilled.  
Some tears they shed, but mingled with their grief  
Glisked a bright gleam of glowing gratitude  
For one who'd served his generation well  
With selfless love; and kindled then a fire  
Which they who follow on (if mark they will)  
Are bound to see and seeing shall exclaim:  
"All praise and thanks to God for Harry Read."

## Notes

1 JC Robinson Lecture '[Some Staveley Worthies](#)' 1959, from which much other information is taken. Copy in the Society's papers.

2 E W J McConnel [Tales of Old Staveley](#). Staveley 1942, p.43,

3 [Westmorland Gazette](#) 3/3/1870

4 [Westmorland Gazette](#) 19/3/1887

5 Deeds of 13, Danes Row (courtesy David Kelly)

Information about where Harry lived and about his family in 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, and 1891 is from the census enumerators' returns.