

The German Sword Makers at Shotley Bridge

Shotley Bridge, on the south bank of the Derwent, is said to have been founded by a German colony. "At Shotley Bridge," we read in Surtees's History of Durham, "a colony of German sword-cutlers, who fled from their own country for the sake of religious liberty, established themselves about the reign of King William. These quiet settlers, who brought with them the habits of industry, and moral and religious principle, easily mingled with the children of the dale, and forgot the language of their forefathers. Few of the original names are now left, but the trade is still carried on, and sword-blades and scimitars of excellent temper are manufactured for the London market. Above the door-way of two decent houses there are German inscriptions (copied into divers huge family Bibles) attesting to the cause which drove these emigrants from their 'faderland' to seek, on the green brink of the Derwent, protection under the equal law of that country which has ever proved an ark of refuge to the victims of religious or political persecution."

In a foot-note the historian subjoins the following German names and dates, taken from the local registers, in proof of these interesting people being at Shotley as soon as the reign of William and Mary :- "John, son of Henry Wofer, Shotley Bridge, baptized April, 1692. Adam, son of Adam and Mary Oley, baptized April 16, 1692. William Henkels and Ann Vooz, married Feb. 13, 1727. Herman Moll, buried Dec. 16, 1716. John Moll, Jan. 28, 1725-6. John Faws, May 9, 1721."

There is reason to believe, however, that Germans had settled in this part of the country long before the Revolution of 1688. Henzells, Tyttores, and Tyzacks, it is certain, came over to England from Lorraine, as Protestant refugees, in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, that is, about 1590. They were glassmakers to trade, and established themselves at Newcastle, where they wrought for some time, "at the Close-gate on the river Tyne" ; but soon afterwards they were removed to Worcestershire, where they founded a glass-house at a spot near Stourbridge, still known by the name of Hungry Hell. They were there under the direction of one of their number, who wrote his name Henzole, and who left descendents. Some of the party subsequently returned to the North, and took up their abode a little to the east of Newcastle, between Ouseburn and St. Lawrence, at a place called the Glass-Houses, under the patronage of Sir Robert Mansel, Knight, Vice-Admiral of England.

The superiority of the Germans in the manufacturing of arms was a matter of universal notoriety two hundred years ago. Smalcald, fifty miles south-east of Cassel, and the village of Stahlberg near it, had even then long been celebrated for the making and tempering of steel, the mines in that neighbourhood furnishing plenty of excellent iron ore, which, when

converted into ware or weapons, was largely exported. Solingen, a small city in the Duchy of Berg, standing upon the Wiffer, which flows into the Rhine from the east about half-way between Dusseldorf and Cologne, was still more celebrated for its fine elastic Damascene sword blades. Tradition has it that it was from Solingen that the Shotley colonists came. They brought with them the art of tempering steel, which was not known in England before their coming.

The foreign sword-cutlers, on arriving here, naturally wished to keep their secret to themselves, and therefore wanted a remote place to carry on their trade. They sought for a locality suited to their purpose in several parts of England, in the first place near London ; but, not succeeding in their mind, they made their way up to the North, and explored the banks of the Tyne. Finally, they fixed on a sequestered spot on Derwentside, a couple of miles above Ebchester, where they found the water peculiarly soft. Indeed, it is said to be second to none in Europe for tempering steel, except that of the Tagus at Toledo, in Spain, where alone the descendents of the German craftsmen deigned to acknowledge worthy rivals in their art.

An old anvil, still standing to the stroke in 1841, when the Rev. John Ryan published his "History of Shotley Spa," was dated 1691 ; and that gentleman gives the following inscription, bearing the same date, as a curious village antiquity :-

DES-HERREN-SEGEN-MACHTET
REICH-OHN-ALLE-SORG-WAN
DV-ZUGLEICH-IN-DEINEM
STAND-TREVV-VND-FLEISIG
BIST-VND-DVEST-WAS-DIR
BEFOHLEN-IST : 1691

A doggerel translation gives the sense of inscription as follows :-

The blessing of heaven gives wealth without care,
Provided that you contribute your share ;
Likewise be faithful, just, and true,
And do what is commanded you.

Mr. Ryan furnishes his readers, as we shall take the liberty of doing ours, with all that remained forty or fifty years ago of another inscription, on what seems to have been the oldest house in the village :-

DEVTSCHLAND.....VER
VATTERLANDS.....MST
DIE-STADT-GE.....
HEER-BEHAVT.....
VND-EINGAN.....

The meaning of the words left entire is that Germany was the native country of the builders, that they had left it to come to this place, and that they besought the Lord to guard them in all their outgoings and ingoings. The house, we are told, was mostly built of solid and massive oak wood, most likely got from the surrounding primeval forest.

Another old house, near the river above the village, commonly called the "Old Forge," now the property of Messrs. Annandale and Sons, paper manufacturers, was, according to its name, a German forge. The old

deeds of the place, which go back to the beginning of Queen Anne's reign, speak of it as then being an extensive manufactory, including several messuages, tenements, watercourses, and dams, and having right to use many roads, no vestiges of which now remain.

The principal German settlement would appear, from the balance of probabilities, to have been formed in William III.'s reign ; but there is conclusive evidence that there were Germans in the immediate neighbourhood at least sixty years earlier, for the first legible entry in the oldest Ebchester register is of the following tenor :- "Eleanor, the daughter of Matthias Wrightson Oley, baptised 1628." Now the Oleys were one of the German families, and the last of them that continued to follow their original occupation. From other entries it would seem that these Oleys had either intermarried with the Wrightsons or were their particular friends, as each family had adopted the custom of giving their children the other's original name, in addition to their surname. The Wrightsons, it appears, were an old family in Ebchester. They had considerable property there ; and at one time they held the church livings at both Ebchester and Medomsley. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that the Oleys were very respectable people, and that they were settled at Shotley Bridge during the first decade of the seventeenth century, in the reign of James I., if not earlier. The probability is also in favour of their having been the founders of the village, which afterwards received an accession of German inhabitants in William III.'s time.

We learn from Camden that the Charter of the Mines Royal was granted in 1565 to Humphries and Shute, who, at the head of twenty foreign labourers, had exclusive patents to dig and search for various metals and to refine the same in England and Ireland ; and that three years afterwards the charter was extended, when the Duke of Norfolk and others were added to the governors, and the whole was styled "The Society of the Mineral and Battery Works." These foreigners, it is added, introduced into England the method of drawing out iron wires by mills, and not, as before, by human strength alone. It is possible that the first Oley was one of the ingenious artisans whom Humphries and Shute brought over ; but there remains no proof of the fact.

The Shotley sword-blades were decidedly the most valuable in the British market, and to the last maintained the highest prices. Latterly, the makers did not manufacture their own iron, as had been done for some time after the commencement of the trade, but purchased the best Swedish iron from Danomora, in Smoland. Out of this they produced their steel and the best-tempered swords in Britain. There was one kind of weapon which, it is said, none in England but themselves could make to perfection. This was the hollow sword blade, which required peculiar skill. In the engraving and gilding department, however, they were frequently equalled, and sometimes excelled ; for they did not regard so much the polish as the temper of their swords, which were made for use and

not for show, for the battle-field and not the drawing-room, for soldiers and not for courtiers.

Situated thus, says Mr. Ryan, having abundance of employment and great remuneration, the Germans, and especially the Oleys, the principal proprietors, enjoyed a long-continued tide of prosperity. Their workmen had large wages, yet their own profits were very high ; the demand for their articles was insatiable ; a journey once a year to London included the whole of their travelling expenses ; and they, therefore, soon acquired considerable property. When Mr. William Oley died in 1808, nearly the whole of the village and the immediate adjoining fields and gardens were left to his sons, three naturally clever men, who had the means of making large fortunes, but who neglected the fair occasion. Competition in making swords increased ; the art of tempering was no longer a secret ; after the close of Napoleon's warring age the demand, prices and profits diminished ; the business was altogether neglected ; intemperate habits soon alienated the property ; so that in 1841 but a small portion of the patrimonial inheritance remained in one branch of the family.

Most of the old German families have become extinct, but some remain, beside the Oley family, and, in particular, several families of the Molls, who now spell their name Mole. In 1834, Christopher Oley, sword-blade cutler, still retained the house in which his ancestor settled ; and in Whellan's Directory for 1856 we find James Oley, auctioneer, and William Oley, cutler and whitesmith, both of Shotley Bridge. The manufacture of sword blades, however, has wholly been given up, and Sheffield and Birmingham supply the market.

Thirty-five years ago, a gentleman living in Ebchester, named Cuthbert Surtees, had in his possession a curious cavalry sword, or sabre blade, which had been presented by one of the Oley family, many years before, to his father, and bore on the back the following sage and appropriate motto :-

Draw me not without Reason ;
Put me not up without Honour.

The historic record would be incomplete without some reference to the employment of the Oleys afforded to the skilled metal engravers of Newcastle, and more especially to the great renovator of English wood engraving, during his apprenticeship to Ralph Beilby. Thomas Bewick was articled to Beilby on the 1st of October, 1767. "The first jobs I was put to," he says, "were - blocking out the wood about the lines on the diagrams (which my master finished) for the 'Ladies' diary,' on which he was employed by Charles Hutton (afterwards Dr. Hutton), and etching the sword-blades for William and Nicholas Oley, sword manufacturers, &c., at Shotley Bridge."

B.

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