

🌀 Blind Jack of Knaresborough 🌀

The story begins with a newspaper article in the **Maidenhead Advertiser** dated 28 January 1967, entitled 'Blind Jack's Mug'. Here is a summary:

Among the possessions of Mr & Mrs Walker was a white mug they never used. Slightly chipped here and there, but Mrs Walker would never part with it. It had been passed down the generations from mother to daughter and Mrs Walker had inherited it when her mother had died two years previously.

Mrs Walker was one of my husband's cousins. On the bottom was the signature of John Metcalf otherwise known as "Blind Jack of Knaresborough", one of our ancestors. It was dated 1778 and had been given to Jack after he guided a messenger of King George III from York to London without the man realising that Jack was blind'.

Blind Jack's Story

Growing up

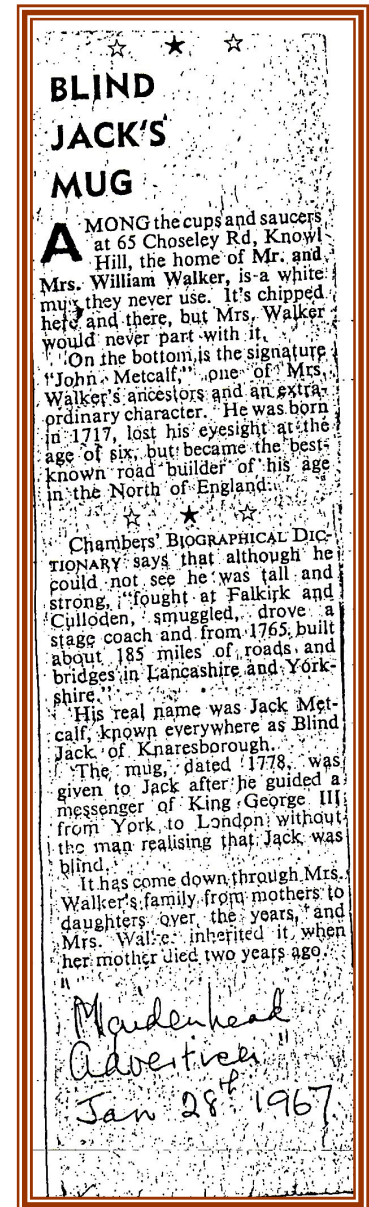
Blind Jack was a most remarkable Yorkshireman. Born 25 of August 1717 in a small thatched cottage opposite Knaresborough Castle he was totally blinded at the age of six by a virulent attack of smallpox.

He began to feel his way about by hanging onto the walls of the cottage and after about six months could find his way to the end of the street without a guide. His father kept horses and despite his blindness he soon learned to ride, especially enjoying a good gallop. Determined not to be held back by his handicap he was soon joining in all the pursuits enjoyed by boys his own age. He went bird nesting with them, climbing trees and guided by his friends, he was soon acquiring his fair share of eggs.

After three years he was running messages all over town. Once he dived into the fast flowing River Nidd in an attempt to save two drowning men, managing to pull one out, who sadly died later. He was tall and well built and in every way a normal young man. He more than held his own at hunting, racing, fishing and wrestling and even kept a few hounds himself. He was also partial to a wager amongst friends, playing cards and bowls, trusting his friends not to cheat. On one occasion he rode his horse in a race at Knaresborough. The grounds were marked out by posts over a mile course, and the race was to be three times round. Odds were laid against the blind man completing the race, but Jack's ingenuity never let him down. He procured dinner bells from the surrounding pubs and placed men at various posts. The sound was enough to direct him during the race and he came out the winner.

From the age of thirteen he had learned to play the violin, becoming so accomplished that he now found this an ideal way of earning a living, playing at country dances and assemblies at the Queen's Head and the George and Dragon at Harrogate. He also played at the Granby Inn at Harrogate becoming good friends with the landlord, Christopher Benson. He also knew the grounds around Knaresborough so well that he began acting as a guide to travellers day and night.

On one occasion, towards dusk, he guided a gentleman along the difficult road from York to Harrogate. This road was little more than a winding, twisting track along unenclosed moors. He brought the gentleman safely to 'The Granby'. Enjoying a convivial drink with the landlord the traveller was incredulous to learn that a blind man had just led him across the moors.



Quote from Samuel Smiles the life of Thomas Telford:

On Metcalf leaving the room, the gentleman observed to the landlord – "I think landlord, my guide must have drunk a great deal of spirits since he came here." "Why so, Sir?" "Well, I judge so, from the appearance of his eyes." "Eyes! Bless you Sir," rejoined the landlord, "Didn't you know that he is blind?" "Blind! What do you mean by that?" "I mean, Sir, that he cannot see – he is a blind as a stone," "Well, landlord," said the gentleman, "this is really, too much, call him in." Enter Metcalf. "My friend, are you really blind?" "Yes, Sir," said he, "I lost my sight when I was six years old." "Had I known that, I would not have ventured with you on that road from York for a hundred pounds." "And I, Sir," said Metcalf, "would not have lost my way for a thousand."

Marriage

Jack was now grown tall, over six foot two, and popular with the ladies, with a decided partiality for the landlord's daughter, Dorothy Benson. When another young lady became pregnant by Jack, Dolly pleaded with him not to marry her. He had never had any intention of doing so, preferring instead to offer some financial help, but in the end didn't even manage this, deciding it would be prudent to make his escape for a while until the scandal had died down. First to an Aunt's in Whitby from where he sailed to London.

However, things were still a little hot in London, where news of Jack's latest escapade had preceded him, so he didn't stay long. He sailed back to Whitby and then travelled on to Newcastle, where he spent several pleasurable weeks in the company of friends who hadn't learned of his most recent adventure. On his way back, he spent some time with sailors at Sunderland, before returning to Whitby to pick up his horse.

On his return to Harrogate he took up his fiddle again, and renewed his promises to Dolly, to the extent of asking her to look after his savings. After amassing the sum of £15, things began to look promising, but Jack lost two thirds of the money at cock fighting. After this a disappointed Dorothy began to look elsewhere. Anthony Dickenson, a young shoemaker with a good business head, from Kirby over Blow, began to look such a promising prospect that banns were read both at Kirby over Blow and at Knaresborough. As the day approached Dorothy was assailed by doubts, finally confessing to Jack on the eve of her wedding, that however poor, she would much prefer to marry Jack. No sooner were the words spoken than a plan was hatched. They both made their separate ways to the pre-nuptial entertainment, but later that night Jack collected Dolly and they eloped.

The next day Jack was playing his fiddle as usual, where everyone was speculating as to Dorothy's absence at her own wedding, and asking Jack if he had any ideas regarding her whereabouts. At this, he invited his friends to congratulate him on his good fortune. The news was received by Dorothy's parents with as much enthusiasm; it is said, "as of seeing their own building in flames."

Jack bought a house for his new wife, then knocked it down and proceeded to rebuild it with stone from the river running alongside. She soon gave birth to their first child, Christopher, named after her father, born in 1739. Shortly after the birth of their second child Tabitha in 1742, Jack became reconciled with his mother-in-law. Although in considerable demand at the Ripon Assemblies, Jack began to try and find some more settled employment, than playing the fiddle, to meet the needs of his growing family.

He hit on the idea of providing transport for hire round Harrogate, for which purpose he set up a four wheeled carriage and a one-horse chaise, the first of its kind in Harrogate. This caught on so well that the local innkeepers of the town followed suit and gradually abstracted most of Jack's business. He then started transporting fish, on horseback, from the Yorkshire coast to Leeds and Manchester, but the hard work and effort involved, never quite produced the hoped for return, despite spending night after night on the road. So once again, we find him playing his fiddle in the long room at Harrogate at the time of the 1745 Rebellion.

The 1745 Rebellion

Prince Charles Edward Stuart, the 'Young Pretender' landed in Scotland on the 25 July 1745 defeated the Government forces at Prestonpans on the 20 September and proceeded to march south. This put an end to pleasurable pursuits. The county voted to raise £90,000 to equip an

army. William Thornton, one of a number of country gentlemen, proposed, at a meeting at York, that this army should march north and take the battle to 'The Pretender', but was overruled, the majority preferring a defensive line. Mr Thornton was not deterred and decided to try and raise his own force at his own expense, but was not successful in raising sufficient volunteers.

He didn't give up and remembered how popular Metcalf was with the locals, so travelled to Knaresborough and sent for Jack to enlist his help. Rumours were rife that the French were about to join the rebels, so the urgency of the situation was explained to Jack. Jack imbued with his usual sense of adventure and newfound patriotism began to act as Thornton's recruiting agent. Within two days he had one hundred conscripts for Thornton's selection of which sixty-four were accepted. They were soon brought up to scratch and marched with Jack at their head playing a march, kitted out in blue and buff, to meet General Wade at Boroughbridge. From here they were sent to join General Pultenay's very much-weakened regiment at Newcastle. Winter had set in and the company's privations were great, with Jack often taking out his fiddle to try and maintain moral round the campfires.

They eventually came across the rebels at Falkirk, Jack not seeing action this time, but engaged in helping to remove cannon that had become stuck in the mud. This was a terribly mismanaged battle ending in total defeat. Twenty of Thornton's men were taken prisoner. Thornton himself took refuge with a poor woman in the town and remained in hiding for several days.

The defeated army returned to Edinburgh, where Jack learned of his friend's disappearance and determined to return to Falkirk to rescue him. He managed to infiltrate Prince Charles's camp on the pretext that he had been engaged as a musician in the Prince's army. Even after a diligent search under this guise he could not discover any information leading to the whereabouts of his master. Unfortunately, he was rumbled by someone from Harrogate who recognised him, was promptly arrested and tried by Court Martial. No real evidence could be laid against him so on his acquittal he made his escape from the rebel camp. On reaching Edinburgh he was delighted to find that Thornton had got there before him.

On the 30 January 1746, the Duke of Cumberland reached Edinburgh and put himself at the head of the army, which regrouped and proceeded north in pursuit of the Highlanders. The Duke stopped at Aberdeen, where he held a ball. Jack was the only musician to be found amongst the Company who could play country-dances. This he did by standing on a chair for eight hours, receiving a present of two guineas from the Duke the next day.

The battle of Culloden followed shortly where the Highlanders didn't stand a chance. This was to be the decisive battle, after which Jack proceeded home with his fellow volunteers. He was greeted by his young wife who had been in great fear for her blind, reckless husband. Having considerably assuaged his spirit of adventure, he determined to settle down and make a good living.

Making a Living

Jack still hadn't started his main occupation in life, for which he is most remembered, that of road building, which was still about twenty years away. He hit on various schemes for making money some legal, some not.

He imported novelty items from Scotland to sell in Yorkshire, and bought and traded horses on both sides of the border. He was also not averse to dealing in a little contraband from time to time.

Later he settled on a new line of business as a carrier between York and Knaresborough employing the first stage wagon along that route. He journeyed twice a week in summer and once in winter. He also undertook the carriage of army baggage that no-one else would handle, since soldiers had a dangerous reputation in those days, but they never did Jack any harm. By this time he had been blessed with another son, and daughter, and was making enough money to keep his family in comfort and respectability.

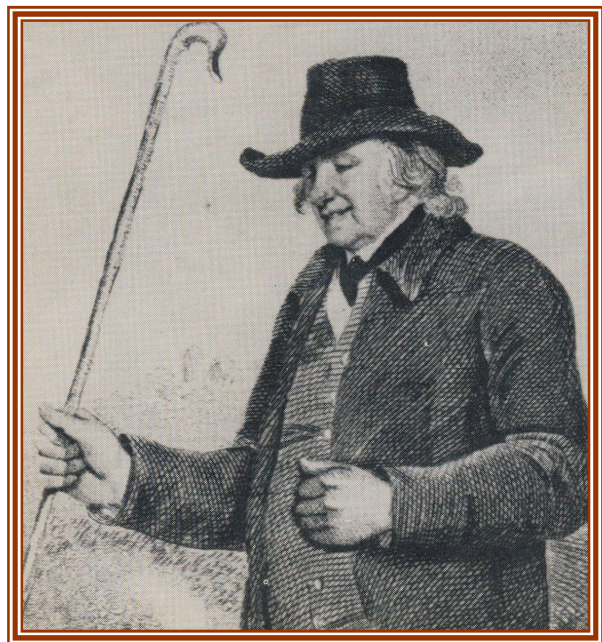
Roads

In one way or another his life so far had been pre-occupied with travel and transport, and Jack was well aware of all the inherent difficulties and the deplorable state of the roads.

The year before his daughter Tabitha was born Jack spent another season in London, in the company of another north country musician who played pipes and was kindly entertained by Colonel Liddell, who gave him a general invitation to his house. Here he also spent time visiting Maidenhead, Reading, Windsor and Hampton Court. When the time came to return north for the Harrogate season, Colonel Liddell offered Jack a seat on his coach, but Jack declined the offer, saying that he could as easily walk as far in a day as the Colonel was likely to travel in his coach, and in any case he would prefer to walk. Amazing to think that a blind man would contemplate a journey of 200 miles let alone along an unknown road, but such was the state of the roads at that time. Jack actually arrived at Harrogate two days before the Colonel.

About the year 1765 an Act was passed to Turnpike the road between Harrogate and Boroughbridge. The surveyor was having difficulty finding someone with sufficient expertise in such a remote area to carry out the work. The ever enterprising Metcalf saw this as the first of many such roads and tendered to construct the first three miles of the road between Minskip and Fearnby.

Mr Ostler the master surveyor knew Jack well and had great faith in his abilities, so he was given the chance. With his customary enterprise and enthusiasm, this stretch of road was built on time and to the satisfaction of the surveyor and the trustees.



This was to be only the first of a near thirty-year career of such enterprises. Jack was, in fact, the first road engineer of distinction, preceding Telford and Macadam. His speciality was his ability to build solid roads across bogs and marshland, which no one previously had managed to do. He was totally self-taught, and ordered his men to pull and bind heather and ling, in very tight bundles and lay one row on top of the other to absorb the water, then lay cartloads of stone and gravel on top, with a cambered surface and good drainage on either side. His roads were solid and comparatively cheap to maintain.

During his long career he constructed over 180 miles of roads. In Yorkshire, he made the roads between Harrogate and Harewood Bridge; Chapeltown and Leeds; Broughton and Addingham Mill; Wakefield and Dewsbury; Wakefield and Doncaster; Wakefield, Huddersfield and Saddleworth (The Manchester Road); Huddersfield and Halifax and between Knaresborough and Wetherby. In Lancashire he also built a great many roads that were becoming necessary to open up communications in the burgeoning industrial towns, where previously the only means of transport had been of sufficient width to allow heavily laden packhorses. He built the road between Bury and Blackburn, with a branch to Accrington and those between Skipton, Colne and Burnley; and between Docklane Head and Ashton-under-Lyne.

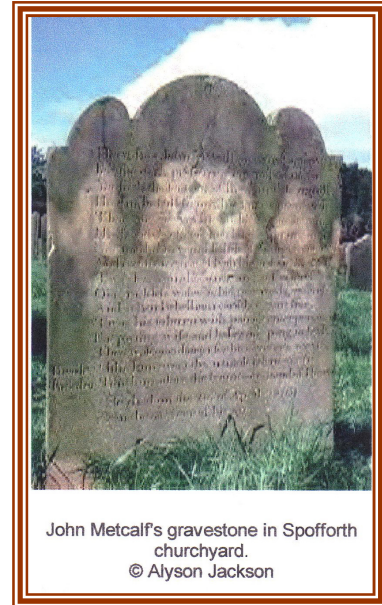
From 1778 he built roads in Cheshire, from Ashton-under-Lyne to Stockport and the 16 mile stretch between Stockport and Mottram in Longdendale, for which he was paid £3,200. He later constructed the roads in Derbyshire from Macclesfield to Chapel-en-le-Frith and Whaley to Buxton. During his road-building career he was paid a total of £65,000.

He completed his last road in 1792 at the age of 75, and retired to live with a daughter and son-in-law at Spofforth near Wetherby. Here not content with idleness he returned to his more youthful occupations of buying and selling, and superintending the operations of the farm. In

1806 he dictated his life story and in the year 1810, his life over, he laid down his staff and departed this world aged 93. He is buried in Spofforth churchyard.

Transcript of Epitaph

Here lies John Metcalf, one whose infant sight
Felt the dark pressure of an endless night:
Yet such the fervour of his dauntless mind,
His limbs full strung, his sprit unconfin'd,
That long ere yet life's bolder years began,
His sightless efforts mark'd th'aspiring man
Nor mark'd in vain High deed his manhood dar'd
And commerce, travel both his ardour shar'd
Twas his a guide's unerring aid to lend;
O'er trackless wastes to bid new roads extend;
And when Rebellion rear'd her giant size,
For parting wife and babes on pang to feel,
Then welcome danger for his country's weal.
Reader! Like him exert thy utmost talent giv'n;
Reader! Like him adore the bounteous hand of Heav'n.



Sources:

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The Life of John Metcalf commonly called Blind Jack of Knaresborough first published in 1795.

Gay Oliver - January 2011 (original research 2002)
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