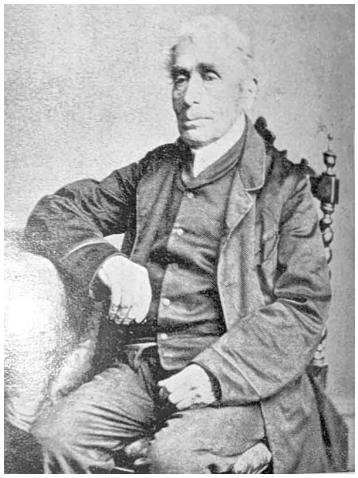
THE AMUSING H. P. CLARK OF RYE

By ARTHUR BECKETT



H.P. Clark age 77

IN the year 1861 there issued from a little printing office at Rye (with the high-sounding title of "The National Printing Office") a small book of 195 pages, entitled "Clark's Guide and History of Rye, to which is added its Political History, Interspersed with many pleasing and interesting incidents." This small volume—which was printed by its author, H. P. Clark—is not easy to come by, but anyone who happens to find a copy should make haste to acquire it, for it is one of the most amusing local histories I have read. This quality of humour is due not only to the "many pleasing and interesting incidents" referred to on the title page but to what the book reveals of the author and printer himself. Clark's work is largely an autobiography.

The author begins to talk about himself on the very first page of his book. In the preface he says:

> I have differed from authors generally, as they use the plural pronoun we, instead of the singular pronoun I; for it is written, Thou shalt not yoke the ox with the ass; therefore I mean to be the one or the other.
>
> I know full well if I get blamed or into trouble, there will be no we to share a part in the one or to get me out of the other; and as to praise I am in too humble a position, too plain in my remarks, to need any we to share in that respect, having no decoration of stile, no profusion of ordinary display of talent, nor expansiveness of intellect to introduce me to particular notice, and my only consolation is in the following verse:
>
> My works may often be admir'd
> When I am dead and rotten;
> If so, 'twill be about the time
> When Shakespeare's are forgotten.
> H.P.C.

H.P.C. had the facility for turning a verse, and examples of this gift appear on almost every page of his "Guide and History."

The next section of the book is headed "To the Public." It is "an outline of my journey, thus far, through life"; only an outline, and, even so, not a complete one, for the "History and Guide" itself (which we shall presently come to) tells us more about H. P. Clark than, probably, he intended to tell.

> "I was born at Brighthelmston, in the Hundred of Wales-bone,[1] in the County of Sussex, in September (4), 1797," he says. He went to a school where he was taught the alphabet and, apparently, nothing more; so he was sent to a "man's school" [it is not clear whether this was a school kept by a man, or a school for male pupils] "where I learnt nothing at all. I was then sent to a superior school to finish my education. There I wrote two copies a week and always had great praise, as they were generally free from blots . . . In cyphering I exceeded my master's and parents' expectations. In this branch I was considered to be very clever. How I came to make such rapid strides was neither known to my master nor to my parents; but I knew. My master was in the habit of taking a glass of ale every day, at eleven, at an Inn called the Seven Stars, and during that time I invariably copied my sums from a book which he had procured previous to his becoming a teacher of the rising generation. In reading I knew nothing. My master always read every verse, and the whole of the class read after him in an

[1] *The Hundred of Walesborne was formerly spelt as Clark has written it.—A.B.*

> audible voice. Sometimes my book was the wrong way upwards; sometimes I did not turn over a leaf when I should; sometimes I turned over two leaves instead of one, and all this did not cause any distraction or delay, for I had arrived at that acme in learning that I could read as well without a book as with; for, as the hunter says, I was always in at the death (end)."

This picture of a lower middle-class school at Brighton is interesting because it is typical of the system of education which was intended to shape the sons of tradesmen in the early years of the 19th century, and which, in fact, prevailed until the establishment of the Board School system in 1870. Clark says that at the age of 14 he left his "academical studies, being a genuine specimen of the old school." He was sent to the village of Nuthurst, near Horsham, to keep the accounts of a farmer and miller, only to discover his educational deficiencies.

After a year Clark joined his father in his turnery business; and when he was 21 his father established him in business on his own account, which he carried on for five years, probably with little success since at 30 years of age he left his native town for Rye, where he set up in his "old business," and married, as he says, "one of the fair daughters of Eve, named Ann Waters, a native of Rye."

About two years later Clark decided to become a printer because the only other printer in the town declined to print "several things that were against the old corrupt system carried on by the patron of the borough, Dr Lamb." In fact, as the Rye printer refused to propagate Clark's own political views the latter determined to set up in opposition to him.

Clark knew nothing of the trade he intended to adopt, and he gives an amusing account of how he endeavoured to cover his ignorance when he sought the advice of a type-founder in London as to the equipment he would require. Printers, and others who understand type, will appreciate his account of the interview with the type-founder.

> "You will want," he said, "so much of Brevier, so much of Pica and so much of Fat-face Pica." Here I was quite at a stand; Pica—I wondered what Pica meant. He still proceeded: "So much of Great Primer, so much of Double Pica." What! more Pica, thinks I. How I wondered what this Pica was; but I dared not show ignorance, having previously given him to understand that I had been in the trade. "Well," he proceeded, "you will want so much Canon." I nodded assent and was as wise as ever. "So much of 4-line Pica, 6-line Pica, 8-line Pica, and 10-line Pica." This was a stunner, and no mistake. There were two things that I was sure of: that I knew nothing what Pica was, and that I shall never forget the name.
>
> "Now," says he, "you will want some furniture"; but whatever furniture meant I knew not, it was equally as foreign as the rest—but there was no more Pica.

Clark housed his "Press, Pica and Furniture" in a garret in Rye; and, a few evenings later, hearing the crier announce that a special meeting of the members of the "Independent Association" would be held at the Red Lion Inn, with very great difficulty he printed a handbill announcing that he had turned printer. The meeting was packed, and Clark sent a copy of his handbill to the chairman, who announced to the meeting "that he had just had a notice placed in his hands that would tend to hasten their political redemption. He said he would not keep them in suspense, but would read the bill that he held in his hand, which was as follows: 'Rye Independent Press, H. P. Clark, Printer.' No more of the bill was read, the burst of joy and surprise being so great, as no one in Rye knew that I had turned printer till that moment."

But "turning printer," Clark soon found, meant that he was expected to have a knowledge of the rudiments of English grammar. He supplied this deficiency of his education by a daily study of Cobbett's Grammar. He determined to emulate that stout yeoman, for

"I soon after published a Grammar in prose and verse; after that my Songs and Recitations, then

my Father's Advice to his Sons, then my Ideas on Legislation, then my Consistency versus Inconsistency, then my Ideas on Free Trade, then my Rambling Thoughts, then How to Choose a Wife, and now my History of Rye. This is a brief sketch of the life of

HENRY POCOCK CLARK."

A man of many attainments, as will be seen. But the reader is not yet made free of the History, for there follows a page of Dedication and another of Introduction. In the former the author declares that his magnum opus is dedicated "to my sons and daughters, namely, Charles Clark, Cyrus Clark[1], Christopher Clark, Caleb Clark, Cornelius Clark, Catherine Clark, Charlotte Clark." It is easy to see which was his favourite letter of the alphabet.

It is unnecessary to dwell upon Clark's short Introduction, beyond noting it, nor need the History itself delay us because his predecessor Holloway and other Rye historians have given us more valuable histories; but Clark has the merit of presenting commonplace local facts in his own original way. Thus when he notes that in 1762 a number of skeletons were found buried in an upright position he adds that if this signified that during their lifetime they lived uprightly he feared that, had the custom prevailed at his day, most of his contemporaries would have to be buried flat!

Of the Court Hall at the top of Lion Street, he says, "Here law is plentiful, and that of the highest price."

Dear things are cheapest in the end,
At least so many say;
If you are summon'd to this Court,
Then you will dearly pay.
Get drunk in Town, kick up a row,
Five shillings, and no more;
But if you do the same in Rye,
You'll have to pay a score.

He has a poor opinion of the local Methodist preachers, "many of whom are not of the first class, for it is an old saying that 'anything will do for Rye.' In fact, many of them show as great a desire for the 'Loaves and Fishes,' and are as great tyrants, as any church minister." He makes an exception of two, the Rev. James Mole, who "was deserving of the appellation of 'Good,'" and the Rev. Thomas Twiddy, "for he did not respect a man because he was rich, nor did he despise a man because he was poor. Rare character this."

"There is one thing very remarkable in this town," he says: "In the Summer most of the streets are covered with grass, and many of the inhabitants are busily employed in salting and brining the same; so that a stranger might readily suppose the town was about to be pickled. But, after all,

Luxuriant the grass it does grow,
In the streets 'tis just like a mat;
And where is a town like old Rye,
In front of each house a grass plat?

E'en chickweed and groundsel for birds,
And thistles for rabbits, as well,
In the streets of Rye may be found;
Where is there a town can excel?

The gay dandelion is there,
Which children, when young, they all dread,
They think if they gather that flow'r

[1] *Cyrus Clark later migrated to Eastbourne, and in 1859 founded that town's first newspaper, the Eastbourne Gazette. But he had had no experience of journalism and made no success of the paper; nor did either of his two (almost immediate) successors—Doeg and Thomas Hayward, the latter of whom eventually sold it to my father, the late T. R. Beckett.—A.B.*

They surely shall water the bed.

The daisy, that fring'd pretty flow'r,
The buttercup, too, may be seen;
Although the grass grows in the streets,
There's no town so neat and so clean."

Of a "high Calvin" chapel built by a rich Mrs Smith, "who is very desirous of doing good to her fellow creatures, in a religious point of view," Clark writes:

There many folks on Sundays meet,
With motives widely odd;
Some go to worship Mrs Smith,
And some to worship God.

The next following chapter is headed "A Guide or Caution for the Pedestrian and Equestrian who may visit the Town of Rye." Our author advises "On entering the Town, through Land Gate Tower, the Pedestrian may feel himself somewhat annoyed, as the road is paved with boulders, and, as many have expressed themselves, with the 'hard ends' upwards. But, Dr Johnson said, 'A pebble that paves the street is in itself more useful than the diamond upon a lady's finger.'"

Then hobble on and never mind,
For what's the use of talking,
Hurt or not hurt, why, only think
On Diamonds you are walking.

And he counsels the equestrian to beware of the many "carts, trucks, wheelbarrows, packages, etc., which are permitted to occupy a large space of the main street; and he will find it quite necessary to drive steady, keep in the middle, look both sides at once and not squint."

Clark is happy-go-lucky in the arrangement of his book: first we have autobiography, then history, then a chapter of the guide, and, again, history. After his advice to the stranger within Rye gates he harks back to early events. In 1563 a plague broke out in Rye, and in three months nearly 600 persons died. A few years later upwards of 1,500 refugees, "in consequence of a massacre and other troubles having taken place in France, fled to Rye for safety . . ."

Now, where's the true bred Englishman?
If in Rye can he be found?
If not, then they are mongrels,
The natives of this town.

"Found"—"town"! Surely Clark's muse has here deserted him!

A Rye man named Quested, who had a horse and chaise for hire, exhibited the following sign:

A Horse and Chaise,
To go always [all ways]
Whether they're good or bad;
Besides I've here,
I do declare,
A very careful Lad.

Clark seems anxious to divide the honour for original signboards with Quested, for he would have us know that he, too, has a sign, "which has caused many to stop and ponder." It is as follows:—

H. P. CLARK
RENOTIATS & RETNIRP,

a puzzle which may be solved by reading the second line from the letter P.

Formerly the old Town Crier of Rye always concluded his announcements by exclaiming "God save the King"; but, says Clark, "this loyal way of finishing his cry is now discontinued, and much of that bowing and curtseying to superiors has fallen into disuse. But Rye is noted for dubbing anyone as 'Esq.,' even down to Lawyers' Clerks this dignified title is conferred."

Well, little things, I often find,
Are pleasing to the little mind;
And any who don't here reside,
And who would wish to keep up pride,
And if a title should require
Why, come to Rye, and be a Squire.

He regrets the increase in the number of public houses. In 1820 there were only four; in 1861, with a very little larger population, there were 23, besides eight retailers of beer and one of spirits.

In days of yore
There were but four,
Where you could slake your thirst;
Now, only think,
Th'increase of drink,
Which drink must prove a curse.

For now, you see,
We've twenty-three,
Best times when four would do;
Now two Police,
And crimes increase,
The Jail made larger, too.

In ancient times
Few were the crimes,
All happy, by the by;
The Jail was small,
Too large for all,
And no Police in Rye.

When the peace with Russia was made known in Rye on May 1st, 1856, the inhabitants took the matter calmly. "Not a bell, except one tolling, was heard, not a flag hoisted, not a gun was fired, not even a solitary cheer was given on so momentous an occasion." And when, a few weeks later, the peace was commemorated, "the Corporation Flag was hoisted on the Tower, and a few old electioneering colours were displayed, all shops were closed, and it seemed more like a day of sadness than of rejoicing. The day was ushered in by the ringing of bells, which seemed to say,

What a humbugging go for Rye,
Rejoicing, it is all my eye,
To draw the purse the rich are shy,
Spend money! No, they'd sooner die;
No one will laugh, no one will cry,
No one rejoice, no one will sigh,"

Clark waxes wrathful on account of the fashion, in his day, of modernising the names of old streets and historic buildings. "Antiquity," he says, "is all that Rye can boast of." Then

"Now, there are some upon this globe,
We call them Yankee Doodles;
But, you won't find beneath the sun,
A place like Rye for Noodles."

"Whenever the rulers of the town are aroused from their somnolency," he adds, "they will not know the names of the streets they live in."

"There is a saying, true it is,
Which no one can deny;
It matters not what it may be
'That's near enough for Rye.'"

There is an interesting note on the superstitious character of the people of Rye in Clark's day:

> Witchcraft, but a few years ago, was believed in by many here; and, up to the present time, it is so by some. To substantiate their belief, they prove by Scripture that there was witchcraft in the days of Inspiration, and why not in these days of adulterated religion. In Huckstepe's Row a horseshoe is placed over the front-door of one of the houses, and one of the inhabitants of the Row, a shoemaker, who could not readily procure a horseshoe, nailed two shoe-clips on the sill of his front-door, to prevent being bewitched. There are several other instances of this occult power; but unbelief has removed many of those supposed powerful signs. It appears that those witches are of the aristocratic race, as they never attempt an entrance only at the front-door. Even amongst ship-owners and masters of vessels, there remains to this day a superstitious notion. They will not allow a vessel to be launched on a Friday on any account whatever, it being considered an unlucky day. Like Lord Byron and Napoleon, who both objected to commence a journey or enter upon any serious affair on a Friday.

"On the Sabbath all shops are closed," says Clark. The fact seems hardly worth noting in a history of Rye, but the author's reason for setting it down is apparent from what follows: "This is showing a great respect for the day, which would lead many to the conclusion that the inhabitants were strictly religious, but experience tells a different tale.

"Do as you would have others do,"
Ah! that is all my eye;
Now that may do for other towns,
'Twill never do for Rye.

"For many of the inhabitants deem it
"Far worse to whistle on a Sunday
Than cheat their neighbours on a Monday."

Clark had a poor opinion of the intellectual qualities of his fellow-townsmen.

> Rye, with about 5,000 inhabitants, for sterling intellect, or great men, is as bare as trees are of foliage in winter. It has but one (Mr Holloway[1]) who is the only star of any magnitude shining in its hemisphere, whom Rye is proud of; a man who has been, and still is, one of the most consistent men of Rye; and his honest and straightforward intentions have caused many base men to strive to defame his character; but they have striven in vain. His harangues are in a mild tone, with a certain degree of candour, conscientiousness and patriotism . . .
>
> It is somewhat curious to relate that almost every merchant, tradesman, farmer and the pa and ma gentry, springs from humble parentage. And yet, any one now in the same humble circumstances would, by the above, be considered too mean to be noticed, being of "low origin."
>
> Pride, pride it is a silly thing,
> Yet, here 'tis carried high;
> Few are the towns in this respect,
> I think, can vie with Rye.
>
> "The humbler and higher classes, generally, would not do for trainers of morality; and as for their wisdom, it is not very attractive."

[1] *William Holloway, the historian of Rye*

After this sweeping criticism of the people of Rye one learns with surprise that the town possessed three honest lawyers. Clark thinks that fact is worth a verse:

Exceptions to a general rule
I find them now and then;

Here's one, three Lawyers liv'd and died
All good and honest men,

and he assures us that this is "no fulsome adulation lavished upon the dead in hopes to please the living." Elsewhere he gives his real opinion of the breed:

If Lawyers should to heaven e'er go,
Then this I know full well,
There's not a man, woman or child
Will ever go to hell.

Apparently Clark was not the only Rye poet. There was Fletcher, of course (though Clark does not mention him), and there was William Wood. William Wood's wife "had a great antipathy to the degrading manner of announcing the death of a poor person by the tolling of the little bell," and she requested William not to have this tolled when she died. William replied "No, Bet, you shall have all eight," and forthwith he composed the following lines:

The little bell became the knell
To some departed soul,
Poor Bet was sick and like to die,
Was griev'd to hear it toll.
Says Bet to Will, "Come listen now,
If death should on me wait,
Don't let me have the little bell";
Says Will, "You shall have eight,"

Betty often made too free with John Barleycorn, a habit which was considered very disgraceful in a lady, and many of William's friends would sometimes suggest a remedy. William's reply was, "Everybody knows what to do with a drunken wife, except those who have one."

Before William Wood died he inscribed the following lines on a plate to be affixed to his coffin:

Here lies poor old W.W.
Who'll never more trouble you, trouble you.

After learning so much of Clark and his opinion of his fellow men one hears without surprise that he was expelled from the Manchester Order of Odd Fellows which he joined at Brighton in 1822 "and that without having any notice that I had committed myself in any whatever, I was neither allowed to hear the charge nor defend it."

There is much more about Clark and his fellow "Ryers" in this book, but probably I have told enough about him. He seems to have been blunt and honest, independent and critical, and amusing withal—a man with whom it was difficult to make friends. One of his best rhymes is on the subject of friendships, from which I take a stanza:

May friendship long exist,
Each passing year outvie,
'Tis like a tender plant,
Which seldom thrives in Rye.

I think he must have been a sour fellow.

N.P.B.