

THE  
TOMBS OF ENGLISH ARTISTS.

No. 5.—THOMAS BEWICK.

NATURE is a grateful mistress to her votaries, and there is no instance of the artist who has studied her beauties, and honestly depicted them, being unrewarded by Fame. Bewick is a prominent example; he studiously and perseveringly devoted himself to this study, and the celebrity he won in his life has increased since his death; all modern refinements in the art of wood engraving cannot eclipse or rival the simple truth and vigour of his woodcuts—

“And the skill which he learned on the banks of the Tyne.”

Thomas Bewick was born in 1753, at Cherry-burn, about twelve miles west of Newcastle, and received his earliest education at Ovingham, on the opposite bank of the river Tyne, Northumberland. His father rented a landsale colliery at Mickley-bank, in the same township, and he assisted him in his labour, having consequently that privation of education which a poor man's son has always to contend against. The lad never lost a chance of improvement, and in good weather or bad walked to his school whenever he could be spared, and noted those bits of nature in his lonely journeys that won him fame in after life.

Bewick's taste for drawing developed itself very early, and determined his father to apprentice him to an engraver of Newcastle, Mr. R. Beilby, who appears to have taken all classes of engravers' work, from initials on tea-spoons, and names on door-plates, up to copper-plates for books; but his ability was but rarely in demand for the latter. In this employ Bewick did not labour long, for in 1768, one year after his apprenticeship, Dr. Hutton wishing to illustrate his *Treatise on Mensuration* with woodcuts, such as he had seen executed in London, applied to Beilby for them; and young Bewick, having made some attempts in the art, was encouraged to persevere, and to him was entrusted the work: he entered upon it with enthusiasm, and succeeded, although he had difficulties of all kinds to contend against, no one to help him over them, and was necessitated to invent his own tools.

Bewick by this means formed a style of his own, and though it would be unfair to state that wood-engraving was a lost art, which he resuscitated, it is perfectly true that it was his superior genius that drew public attention toward it, established it on its present firm basis, and thus “wedded Art unto the press.”

He returned to Cherry-burn when his apprenticeship was completed: it was his custom to pay weekly visits there, and shout his inquiries across the river, when it was too swollen to ford. His heart was in his early home, and when writing in after years to a friend, he says—“I would rather be herding sheep on Mickley-bank top than remain in London, although for so doing I was to be made Premier of England.” London was not to his taste; he visited it in 1776 for a short time, and was employed by Hodgson, the best wood-engraver of that day,—probably in consequence of having received, the year before, the award of a medal from the Society of Arts, for a cut illustrative of the fable of the “Huntsman and the Old Hound.” In 1777 he returned to Newcastle, entered into partnership with his former master, and thenceforward devoted his chief attention to engraving on wood. His first work was an illustrated edition of “*Gay's Fables*,” published by Saint, of Newcastle, in 1779, whose trade chiefly consisted in children's books, many of which Bewick illustrated in conjunction with his younger brother John. In 1784 they engaged in publishing an illustrated edition of “*Select Fables*,” but it was in the cuts for the “*History of Quadrupeds*,” published in 1790, that his great genius fully acknowledged itself. The truth and vigour with which the animals were delineated, and the admirable treatment of the accessories,—the characteristic tail-pieces, where his profound study of nature told to such great advantage,—rapidly made him a great fame. He had thus struck out a path for himself in which he is still alone: he was no slavish cutter of lines laid down for his guidance, as the more modern wood-engraver too frequently is; but he cut with his graver out of the wood many an object no draughtsman could place there—such as the minute figures in a farm-scene, the birds that flit in his vignettes,

and the rich foliage that clothes his trees, all of which are expressed by his graver, with the ready knowledge of a dextrous hand, guided by a mind completely familiar with the objects he depicts. Elaborate labour is now bestowed on wood engravings, and wonder may be excited at the weary toil they exhibit; but the vigour and truth of Bewick's bolder works elevate them far above mere manual dexterity—nor will better engraving rival his well-earned fame, until drawing is more definitely expressed with it, as it is in all his woodcuts.

An illustrated History of Birds next engaged his attention, and here his power of delineation strongly appeared: the minutiae of plumage is always wonderfully rendered, and the tail-pieces with which he decorated his pages, are redolent of original genius.

In 1797 Bewick dissolved his partnership, and thenceforward worked with his pupils regularly and methodically at Newcastle, in the house delineated in our cut. It is situated in St. Nicholas church-yard, and the double-windowed room in the roof was



BEWICK'S HOUSE, NEWCASTLE.

the one he constantly inhabited. Here all his best cuts were executed, and here he acquired both fame and competence. His simple habits never left him, nor did he ever indulge in expensive pleasures, or sigh for more than the healthy enjoyments of nature.

Bewick died in 1828, at the age of seventy-five, and is buried at the west end of Ovingham Church, beside his brother John, who died in 1796, at the

early age of thirty-five. John had left his northern home for London, where he practised his art for many years: a pulmonary complaint affected him, and he returned to die at Ovingham. The small tablet on the church wall records his death, and that “his ingenuity as an artist was excelled only by his conduct as a man.” His works have not the artistic excellence displayed in those of his brother, whose tomb simply records the death of



BEWICK'S GRAVE, OVINGHAM.

himself and his wife Isabella, whom he outlived two years. He laboured steadily at his art while life lasted; and “The Old Horse waiting for Death,” was his last work left unfinished at his decease.

There is a useful lesson in such a life as Bewick's, teaching as it does this great fact,—that fame and competence may await the patient exercise of native talent, directed by the bias of its own strength. Bewick struck out his own course, wisely adhered to it, and was content with what it brought him. His moderate wants were more than sup-

plied, and a happy old age was his reward. More ambitious men have failed to obtain the renown he has secured by his unpretentious Art-labour, and he will be remembered when many who mistake notoriety for fame, and the fashion of a day for the homage of all time, are forgotten. Wordsworth gave a tribute to his genius, and Professor Wilson exclaims of him,—“Happy old man! the delight of childhood, manhood, decaying age! A moral in every tail-piece, a sermon in every vignette.”

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