

'The Hewitsons and the Wakefield Herald, 1894 to 1911'

by Dr Andrew Hobbs

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Dr Hobbs began his lecture by highlighting the importance of the local Press, not only for historians of today, but especially for local people and local life at the time. To illustrate this, it was often the fashion at the time to bury time capsules under the foundation stones of local buildings and when the Corn Exchange opened in Wakefield in 1837, a time capsule which included the Wakefield Herald, was so buried.

There was no national Press to speak of at the time and people's need for information and news was, rather, satisfied by a national network of local papers as local entrepreneurs and businessmen identified an opportunity to make money from local pride. There were at least a dozen newspapers in Wakefield at various times throughout the 19th Century.

By the 1890s, however there were five main publications. Alongside and in competition with the Herald, set up by local Conservatives in 1835, were the Wakefield Express set up by the Robinson family and the Liberal party in 1852, the Free Press which was in business from 1860 to 1902. The Free Press began as an apolitical newspaper before being sold to the local Labour candidate. The Advertiser was a Victorian free sheet and finally the Echo, published from 1876 onwards.

Dr Hobbs moved onto to speak about Anthony Hewitson himself, whose diaries he is researching. Hewitson was born in Blackburn in 1836, began his working life as a printer's apprentice at the Lancaster Gazette, before moving on in the world to become a reporter, then editor and ultimately a newspaper owner. Politically, Hewitson began as a Liberal radical before becoming a Conservative as he moved through life.

There are 17 surviving volumes of his diaries, quite gossipy in style, about who he's met, what's been said, full of anecdotes about everyday life. They also record the sadness in his life, with entries about the deaths of two of his daughters who both died aged 2. In all, Hewitson had eleven children of whom seven survived.

Hewitson also published a number of history books.

In 1894 Hewitson moved on from his native Lancashire and came to the West Riding, for reasons that are not altogether clear. It seems that by buying into the Wakefield Herald, he saw that, with money to invest, having sold up his newspaper business in Preston, there was still room for small independent newspapers. The purchase also gave him the chance to provide employment for his three sons.

Initially, Hewitson went into business in the West Riding with Charles William Carr, but they very soon fell out, as is well documented by Hewitson in his diaries, and in April 1896 Hewitson buys out Carr for what was then a substantial sum of £3250.

Hewitson had moved over to Wakefield, renting a house in Garden Street. Sadly, he didn't enjoy a good reputation during his time in Wakefield. This was reciprocated by him - his diaries show him to be argumentative and litigious with a poor view of Wakefield and its inhabitants.

In some ways he was a man ahead of his times, foretelling the later excesses of Fleet Street, cultivating a “tabloid” culture, in particular in his Lancashire papers. As an employer he was ruthlessly anti Trade Unions and got rid of union members in his businesses.

Hewitson gradually withdrew from active involvement and increasingly handed over the running of the paper to his three sons, Ethelbert, Llewellyn and Horace, all of whom lead colourful lives, in one way or another, all faithfully documented by their father in his diaries.

The Wakefield Herald was eventually sold in 1911, a year before Hewitson’s death in 1912, and the newspaper folded in 1913.

Dr Hobbs was thanked by the Chair on behalf of the meeting for a fascinating and extremely informative presentation and took several questions from an interested audience.

@Steve Hargrave

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