

## **Tewkesbury Centenarian.**

### **A REMARKABLE OLD LADY AND HER INTERESTING STORY OF OLD TEWKESBURY.**

On Sunday last Mrs. Sarah Ann Fletcher celebrated her hundredth birthday at the Union Infirmary where she has lived during the past three years. Such an occasion could not pass without a suitable celebration and everything was done under the kindly supervision of the popular Master and Matron (Mr. and Mrs. Gayton) to make the event a happy one for the honoured figure of the day. Mrs. Fletcher though blind and bedridden retains her other faculties to a remarkable degree.

On her auspicious birthday she had bacon and toast for breakfast, and for dinner, chicken, beans and potatoes and trifle, with a little bottled cider, and her attendant at the mid-day meal was Mrs. Alec Badham, wife of the Clark to the Guardians. In the afternoon the venerable lady held a tea party and she was able to walk a few steps from the bed she usually occupies to one arranged for the occasion. The room was very nicely decorated, the colour scheme being in pink and her guests were her sons, Mr. Charles Fletcher, of Spring Gardens, and Mr. Thomas Fletcher, of New Swindon, Wilts., her daughter, Mrs. Jones, of North East Terrace, and a dozen grandchildren and great grandchildren, making up a unique and happy party. The Chairman of the Board (Mr J S Sargeaunt) called to offer his congratulations and good wishes. Mrs. Fletcher also received good wishes wholesale from everyone in the house and all officers and most of the other occupants presented her with gifts. The Rev. W. Davies, of the Congregational Church of which Mrs. Fletcher has been a member since childhood, called with the gift of a nice warm crimson dressing jacket from the members of the Church. Mr. and Mrs. Walter Heath, of High Street, presented a handsome iced birthday cake decorated with a horse shoe and bearing the figures 1822-1922.

At 7 p.m. the old lady retired for the day, feeling tired – though not overdone by the day's events.

A representative of this Journal spent a delightfully interesting half-hour with the old lady. Not only has she a wonderful memory, but she is able to converse in a refined and not enfeebled voice, with all the intelligence of a young woman. It seemed almost beyond belief that the conversation was with one who had lived for one hundred years. Not for one moment did Mrs. Fletcher wander in the course of a long story of her younger days, told with ease and considerable humour and conversational ability. She expressed her pleasure in receiving her visitor, whom she remembered as a youth, and talked with freedom during the whole of the interview. Mrs. Fletcher who was born at a house in Clarke's Alley, High Street, on Tuesday, the 24th September, 1822, was a Miss Tovey, her brother being for many years later the landlord of the King's Head Hotel. She was married to Mr. Fletcher at the Cheltenham Congregational Church by the Rev. Dr. Browne, a celebrated Congregational Divine, who was the father of a former Recorder of Tewkesbury. Mr. Fletcher was a gunsmith and bellhanger with a shop in Barton Street

now occupied by Mrs. Watson. He was captain of the Tewkesbury fire brigade and whilst engaged at a fire on the premises of a firm of ironmongers – Messrs. Turner & Yorke – whose shop was opposite the Town Hall and is now a boot shop, he sustained an injury which had such a serious effect upon his health that he died a comparatively young man. His business and premises and other property he owned in Fletcher's Alley was then sold and his widow was left with six young children.

Mrs. Fletcher dwelt with evident pleasure upon some of her recollections of Tewkesbury. She said that her memory remained so clear that she could remember most things of outstanding interest since she was a child of two years of age: in fact the first great event of her life she experienced at this tender age, and the old lady told the story in a way which afforded her and her hearer considerable amusement. One evening her father came home and asked her if she would like to go to the theatre where a black woman was going to dance and sing. This took her childish fancy and perched on her father's shoulder she rode off to the theatre, which occupied the site in the Oldbury upon which the Picture Palace stands. Her mother and brother made up the family party. Sure enough she saw the black woman dance and heard the black woman sing. The scene was laid in a draper's shop and the song of the black woman was that she went into a draper's shop a flannel petticoat to buy. The chorus of the song closed with the singer's assertion that " when she put the money down she gave the shopman's hand a squeeze, which so much surprised him that he went upon his knees." Mrs. Fletcher gave this incident as an example of the excellence of her memory which had never failed her in any part of her long life.

The Coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837 stands out in her memory as one of the greatest of all celebrations in Tewkesbury. As a child of fifteen she, with all the other children of the town, sat down to a dinner in the old Market Hall. The town was alive all day with various sports and other amusements and at night every pane of glass in every window in the town was illuminated with a tallow candle. So great was the demand for tallow candles that it was said that Mr. Timms, the tallow chandler then living in High Street, made a small fortune: the people in hundreds went to the Severn for clay which they moulded into a ball with a hole to receive the candle and thus overcame the difficulty in providing holders for the immense number of candles used. The effect of this general illumination of the town Mrs. Fletcher described as wonderful.

Another great day in Tewkesbury was when gas was first lighted. Prior to its introduction the High Street was illuminated by oil lamps fixed on brackets: these were affixed to the houses in the Black Bear, Red Lane, Quay Lane, Smith's Lane and Tolzey Lane and these were the only street illuminants. Then gas 'works were erected, and it was a red letter day for the town when the new form of lighting was first demonstrated. Hundreds of people came to Tewkesbury from the villages and even wider parts to see what the much talked of gas was like, and very gay and festive were the proceedings on that occasion.

Mrs. Fletcher appeared somewhat pleased that she can claim to be a little older than the Mythe Bridge. Prior to the opening of the bridge people from Bushley, l'orthampton and villages on that side of the river had to cross the Severn at the Lodes. At the Upper Lode

was the Dowdeswell Arms Inn, now the residence of Mr. Christopher Ball, and here were pleasure gardens and the spot was a very popular resort of all classes of Tewkesbury people. There was a good deal of traffic from the west over the Upper Lode whence the roadway ran into Tewkesbury over the Ham and via the Quay Lane. Before the advent of the railways Tewkesbury was a busy and prosperous little town, but with the falling off of road and river traffic its old prosperity was weakened.

Mrs. Fletcher well remembers the coaching days when twenty four coaches passed through Tewkesbury each day. Most of these coaches stopped at the Swan Hotel or the Cross Keys Hotel then adjoining, now the premises of Messrs. Bradley and the London City and Midland Bank. Some of the coaches were " flyers" holding an equivalent status to the express on our railways of today – one famous flyer was the "Aurora," which stopped at the Swan Hotel. Another coach which was always an object of interest was the " Paul Pry," which had its stopping place at the Anchor Hotel, a famous four-in-hand and the main interest in this seemed to be that it was the one vehicle which conveyed from Tewkesbury, prisoners for transportation when sentences on law breakers were of a most merciless character. Prisoners were chained to the coach to prevent escape. Mrs. Fletcher remembers a youth named Griffiths who stole a leg of mutton from her cousin who was a butcher: the unfortunate youth was sentenced in Tewkesbury to a term of seven years' transportation. Another young man received a similar punishment for breaking into a cellar in Double Alley.

The latter after serving his term did very well and made good in Australia. The Police Station was then under the Town Hall and the gaol which was used for the incarceration of prisoners was where the present Police Station stands. The cattle fair was then held in the High Street where the animals were sold in the street by the Auctioneer by a somewhat different method to that obtaining today. There was always a good supply of stock and the custom of selling in the street was discontinued in consequence of a serious attack by a cow upon the wife of Mrs. Fletcher's brother who by the way was at that time Stationmaster at the old Tewkesbury Station – the site of the present station then being allotment gardens. As a result of this incident the cattle markets of to-day sprang into being.

Mrs. Fletcher vividly recalled the festivities which attended the laying of the foundation stone of the Waterworks and the opening of the Severn Locks, both being " grand days."

She well remembers the race meetings held on the Ham for which the then Prince of Wales gave a gold cup. Tewkesbury races were of wide renown and thousands of people came from all parts and in all kinds of the conveyance or the day. The approach was by the Quay Lane and at that time there was a toll gate on the Quay bridge, and said Mrs. Fletcher, the old man in attendance who lived in a hut close by had a very busy time on race days. The grand stand – a commodious structure – was erected in the middle of the Ham and the clerk of the course and stewards were all arrayed in red coats and white breeches and leggings. The course was fenced with stakes and ropes and anyone could go on to the Ham free of charge and view the racing. The course was then considered to be

the finest race courses in England and it was a wonderful sight to see the thousands who came to Tewkesbury races.

Michaelmas Fair in days gone by was something entirely different to what Mrs. Fletcher saw of it in recent years: there were booths and stalls everywhere. Young men and young women who sought situations stood in the street round the Cross near the point now occupied by Messrs. Frisby's shop and people who wanted servants there interviewed those of their choice. The young men wore a piece of whipcord in their clothing and young women favours until they were hired when these were removed. At length in consequence of disorder and serious obstruction caused by this practice the young men and maidens seeking situations assembled at the Town Hall. The 10th of October Fair was preceded by mops held a week before and a week after the fair – the latter being termed the runaway mop, and these being also attended in large numbers, the first two weeks in October were somewhat lively.

Mrs. Fletcher once went to London where she spent a week at the time of the great exhibition in 1851: she has also visited Bath, Bristol, and other places but she never liked any place as she does Tewkesbury, and in no other place could she make herself so happy in the whole course of her long life. She is evidently proud of being a native of Tewkesbury. For twelve years she has been unable to see and though she is troubled with sciatica her general health is excellent. She says she is very happy in her present home and is very grateful for the kind treatment she receives from all.

It is clear to everybody who knows Mrs. Fletcher that her aged heart is full of human kindness: the pride and pleasure with which she spoke of her sons and daughter indicated that they have reason to be proud of a mother love undimmed by age or the vicissitudes of a hundred years of life. May it be that they may continue to enjoy it and that yet many peaceful years are in store for Tewkesbury's remarkable old lady.