

WILLIAM COPELAND ASTBURY, 1783-1868.

William Copeland Astbury was born in Staffordshire on 22 September 1783, the son of John Astbury, a potter [1760-1825], and Hannah, nee Copeland [1758-1825] and the eldest of their six children. The family came to London in 1790 and lived near Herne Hill. William was educated at Tills School, Pentonville, where Charles Vyse was his schoolmaster. He went to work for Josiah Spode at his Portugal Street warehouse, by Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1798, no doubt under the patronage of his mother's brother, William Copeland [1765-1826] who entered into partnership with Spode. John Astbury was a deeply religious man and young William used to accompany his father when he preached for the London Itinerant Society in the late 1790s. His membership of this Society and his eventual internment in Bunhill Fields shows that John Astbury was a Dissenter. Other references imply that this was in association with Whitefield's Tabernacle, an Independent Calvinist cause. During the Napoleonic wars William served in the Bloomsbury & Inns of Court Association (volunteers) and kept his uniform and musket against the day they might be needed. He still had them ready for action as late as the Chartist meetings of 1848. As a single man he lodged in Pentonville and worked his way up to a responsible position alongside his uncle, William Copeland, whose house on Lincoln's Inn Fields communicated with the Portugal Street warehouse to the rear. Spode and Copeland dealt not only in the productions of the Staffordshire pottery but general merchandise from around the world.

This was the happiest period of William's life but it ended, first with the death of his parents in 1825, and then his Uncle Copeland in 1826. Although he had a handsome legacy from his uncle William was no longer prominent in the business. His cousin, William Taylor Copeland [1797-1868], preferred another of his father's protégés, Thomas Garrett, to help develop the firm and William was sidelined, leaving the business in 1826. He set up house with his unmarried sister, Hannah [1801-1880], at first in Plymouth, but subsequently in London, settling in High Street, Camden Town, from 1831-1844, and when that became built up, moved to the rural outskirts at Munster Terrace, Fulham, where he spent the rest of his life. He died 10 June 1868.

At some point round about 1832 he returned to the Copeland and Garrett warehouse, in a role equivalent to chief cashier. He had overall responsibility for banking the receipts of the business and undertook personal commissions for William Taylor Copeland, who by now was prospering as a city merchant, serving as Lord Mayor and, for a time, as Member of Parliament for Coleraine. William retired from the business again in 1842, just before his move to Fulham. Copeland over-extended himself in railway speculation and horse-racing and his partnership with Garrett ended in recriminations. Astbury, his sister and one of his brothers had put up some of the capital which had enabled Copeland to buy up the Stoke on Trent factory from Spode's heirs. For a while they watched nervously to see if the business would continue. Copeland stabilised it by selling the Lincoln's Inn Fields and Portugal Street premises to the Royal College of Surgeons and opening a new showroom in New Bond Street. He was also helped when the North Staffordshire Railway, one of his principal investments, began to make a profit.

Although no portrait of William Astbury survives he did record his description as given in the passport with which he was issued when he travelled to Paris in 1834. He was then 5ft 7 in tall, with grey eyes, a medium nose and an oval clean-shaven face. We know he wore a sober suit and white necktie, which sometimes led people to mistake him for a clergyman. He also had spectacles to remedy his short sight. Like any gentleman of his class he always went out with a walking-stick. William Astbury travelled extensively in

England each year as well as his French trip. After 1842 he made an extended stay in Repton, Derbyshire, to consider whether to take up farming. He also spent over a month at an Independent academy in Fakenham, Norfolk, seeking help with his preaching. He was extraordinarily active in religious and philanthropic enterprises, of which the most striking for modern eyes is his involvement in fighting prostitution. He attended places of worship in all denominations but his preference was for Evangelical Church of England and Congregational ministers.

He kept Journals for a large part of his life. Those from 1829 to 1848 survive, but with gaps. This still leaves 630,000 words. The Journals are largely factual, but with occasional reflections. Through his eyes you can enter the first London omnibuses (where you may meet the exiled Mons. Guizot), the new river steam boats (which sometimes ran aground on sandbanks) and travel on the first railway services (such as the rope-hauled London and Blackwall). The development of both Camden Town and Fulham are covered in some detail. New wonders such as steel pens and double-entry book-keeping enter his business experience. He takes on William Acton who, he believes, underestimates the plight of child prostitutes. His religion, though significant, is not over-stated. He prefers fervent Evangelical preaching but he knows also that unheated churches will not prosper and that a draughty seat is to be avoided. His verdict on the brilliant but controversial preacher Edward Irving is not that he is unsound but that he goes on too long. He abhors ritual and he believes the bishops gravely underestimate the potential of the laity.

The interest lies in the interpenetration of all these aspects. In modern terms this is a video diary in which the famous, such as the Duke of Wellington, have walk-on parts while the real action is located among the middle-classes and the labouring poor. Astbury had the Wordsworthian tendency to catechise people leaning on gates. Because you have looked over William Astbury's shoulder as he works his way through his French New Testament or his hypochondriacal obsessions with diet and exercise you are in a better position to walk round Richborough Castle with him or stand at the roadside as the Queen and Prince Albert drive past and acknowledge your bow. In addition we can fill out the history of the Spode family and business, learn about aspects of the Abney Park Cemetery Company for which no other records exist, hear the adolescent bravado of girls from the streets, travel down the Thames to Gravesend or up to Hampton Court for the air and watch the navvies dig out the Chalk Farm cutting for the London and Birmingham railway. It is a rich slice of London and English life which is recognisable in writers such as Dickens but seen from quite another angle.

Note on the published text:

Every attempt has been made to give an accurate transcription of the original, complete with omissions which Astbury himself left. Abbreviated words have usually been given in full. No footnotes have been added to the text but there are brief notes in the index. The public characters can be studied further in the New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and the minor characters have some information added from census returns. Various historical guides to London have been consulted to provide basic details of locations mentioned in the text. The object has been to keep the supplemental material to a minimum in order to make the text accessible for the general reader while still being available to the specialist historian.