

Joseph Argyle

1817 - 1901

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If you know of Leslie Argyle, who has been mayor of Ock Street numerous times, you might like to read about his great uncle Joseph Argyle (1817 - 1901) and other of his ancestors. Leslie's grandfather, John Argyle, was my gg grandfather and Joseph my ggg uncle. The Argyles have a long history with Ock Street.

Joseph received all his official schooling at the Baptist Sunday school on Ock Street and occasionally got to hang around his neck the board which said 'Good' when he performed particularly well. His eldest sister, Hanah, helped him to improve his reading skills through bribery: she paid him ha'pence to learn hymns while he worked at a spinning wheel.

Other intriguing information comes to light in the eight of his journals which an aunt here in Toronto has loaned to me.

Although Joseph, his siblings and parents moved house a few times they always lived on one or the other side of Ock Street, near the Cross Keys tavern. They attended the Baptist chapel faithfully.

At the end of Joseph's school days he was encouraged to become a teacher of children of the Sunday school, but declined, being unsure of his ability to control children. His father whom he greatly respected then insisted father and son together attend the prayer meetings in and around Abingdon. Apparently they both envisioned the adult Joseph somehow involved seriously in their faith. Joseph, having earned meagre income as a weaver for a longish period, eventually was 'induced to become a teacher at the Independent School and to attend the prayer meetings connected therewith

"At the very first of which my affections were suddenly drawn to a young woman - one of the teachers then present. Such is nature. It was a long time before I knew that she had a lover. Of course I had now to turn away my face."

In 1843, he married Amey (Beekith?), who had been resident in the home of the Sunday School Superintendent. The couple parented a son and daughter. Amey, little Joseph and Esther all died in 1848.

Joseph's father, Richard Argyle, born 1777 in Abingdon and married at St. Helen's Church in 1804 to Hannah Wells, was a well thought of if quite poor man at his death in 1852. He had been a weaver, a hemp dresser and finally a sack manufacturer. At that time his home was a Tomkins almshouse on Ock Street, where Joseph, also a weaver, bereft of wife and children, lived with him. He nursed his father.

“May the Lord give me patience and calmness of mind”, he wrote in 1851. “Father has lived to see his 74 years thro’, and the year on which he now enters will, I think, be his last. He still continues the habit of prayer, at the family altar, though incapable of it, for he cannot give expression to what he wishes to say. A few years ago, he used to pray for twenty minutes at the prayer meeting! And occasionally he conducted the afternoon meeting in the vestry, and went also to Drayton with the local preachers. Those who have known him for many years say that Father has worked as hard as any man and as many hours.”

In 1855, Joseph married Mary Kirby of Faringdon. By then he was a supply preacher looking for permanent work. He was shockingly dependent on the kindnesses of church people to keep himself alive. On occasion he did not know where he would get his next meal, being without funds of any kind. A shilling here pressed into his palm, a pound there, a dinner invitation. He usually travelled on foot - often many miles. On one wet Sunday he preached covered in mud to his knees.

Joseph’s brother, Israel, was also a preacher. He spent most of his adult life in Westmorland where Joseph had a posting himself for a while. Israel visited Abingdon in 1860 at a time when Joseph was preaching at numerous chapels within and beyond Abingdon.

“In the evening, Israel went on the Bury to preach, but the Rifle Core coming along with their band very much disturbed the service.”

“On the Saturday, he (Israel), accompanied us to Benson, and on Sunday, he took the service for me at Dorchester and Rooke. We read at Rooke on the Monday and then we went on to Berrick where he preached on the green to a considerable number. Next morning he bade us farewell. May heaven protect us while we are separately travelling on to glory and to God.”

From 1870 to 1876, Mary and Joseph held a pastorate in Chadlington. When that posting ended with seventy pounds to tide them over, they returned to Abingdon and were employed at the Wesleyan Chapel as chapel keepers. It was a humbling experience for the couple to do menial labours for income, in a church which they did not support. Joseph then was appointed Hall keeper as well and it was in this position that he found a new purpose. While supervising the Reading Room/Hall he read and wrote. He began to write letters to the editors of various newspapers including the Abingdon Herald. He mailed off his opinions on many subjects, most pertaining to moral values and religion, his lifelong passion. One of his journals is filled with clipped copies of his short missives. THE STORM is typical of his simple, practical advice.

“The STORM

Sir, - Tuesday, the 24th of October (1882) will be a day long to be remembered by the people of Abingdon, on account of the extraordinary

storm and consequent flood the rain continued until about two o'clock. By that time Stert Street and Broad Street were partly under water
... The improvements lately made in the Ock Street answered their purpose well, so now the authorities may be led to consider how the water course from the north may be turned into another channel, or the bed of the stream widened and deepened to prevent the very unpleasant occurrence again occurring. We shall now have a high flood in the neighbourhood of the river, and those who come into town from Culham quarter will have to drive their horses through the flood which is running across the Culham Road.

Yours truly,
J.A.”

Joseph's writings were not mentioned in his 1901 death notice. The Abingdon Herald stated that he was 'one of the oldest and staunchest of Nonconformists in Abingdon, of which he was a native. For some years he was a Baptist minister in a rural district of Westmorland, and also in Oxfordshire, and until recently he was a local preacher in this district.'

I long to find the other eighteen journals which Charlie Argyle, grand nephew to Joseph, still held in his possession in the 1960's, perhaps in Crowthorne.