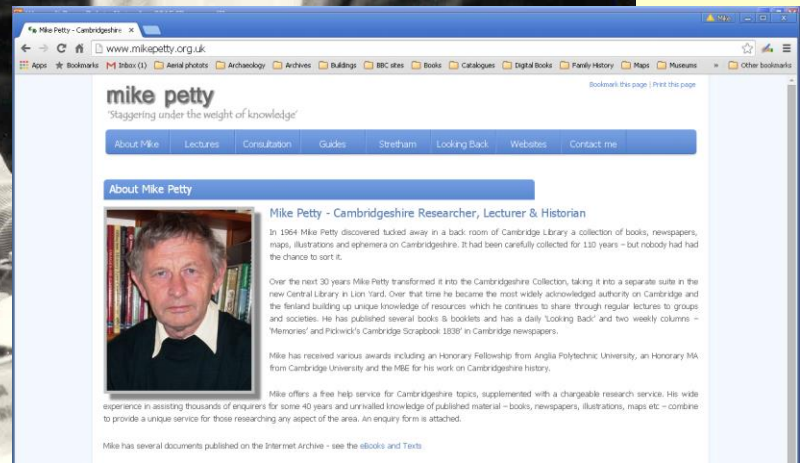
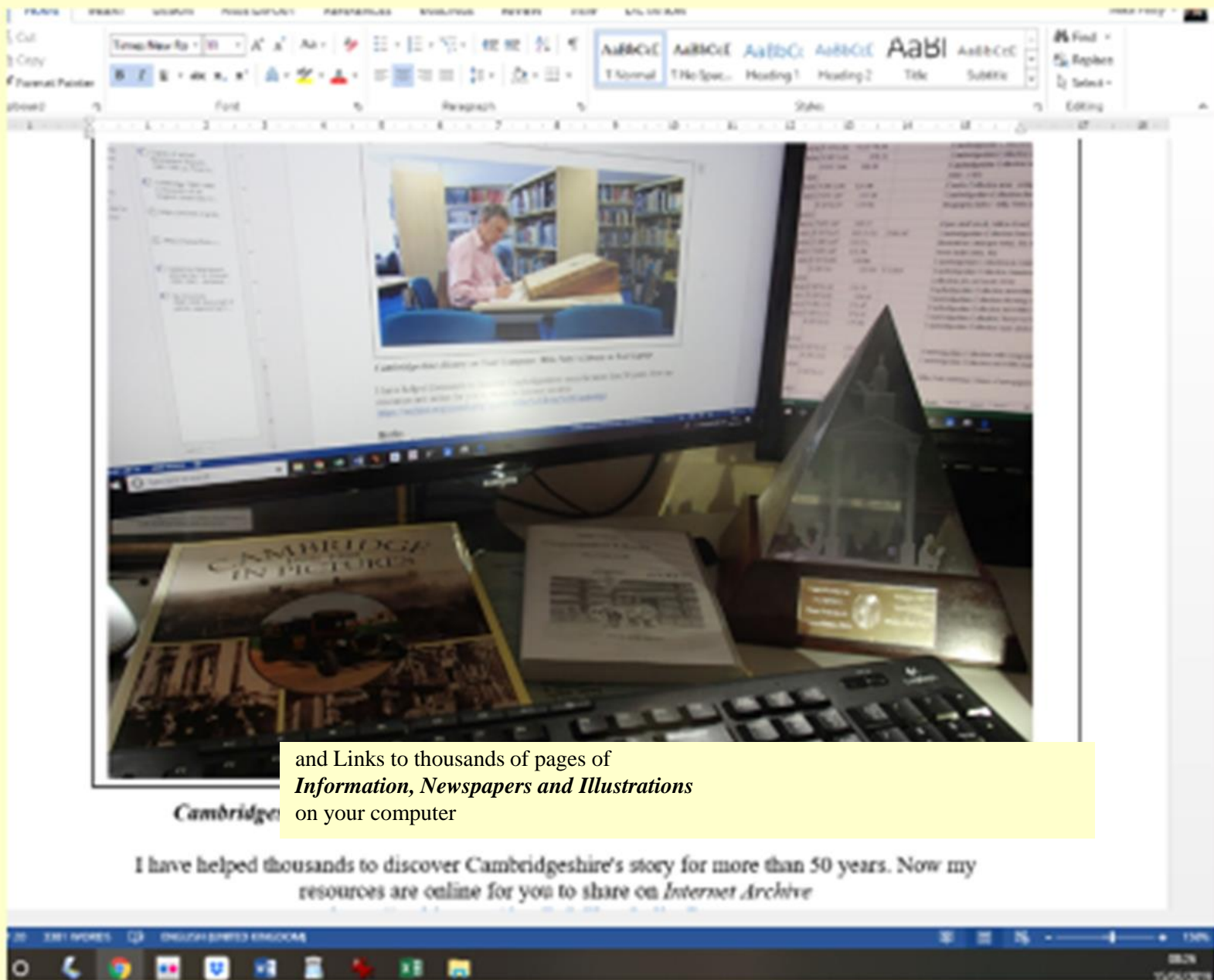


Mike Petty  
helping  
Cambridgeshire  
historians  
for 50 years

www.mikepetty.org.uk





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I have helped thousands to discover Cambridgeshire's story for more than 50 years. Now my  
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## Fenland History on Facebook

is a place to seek and share information on  
**Cambridge** and its **County**  
(not just the Flat Black Bit)

But when it comes to a choice ***Fens come First***

information about the Cambridgeshire fens, past and present.... See more



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Ely, Cambridgeshire, United  
Kingdom

CREATE NEW GROUPS

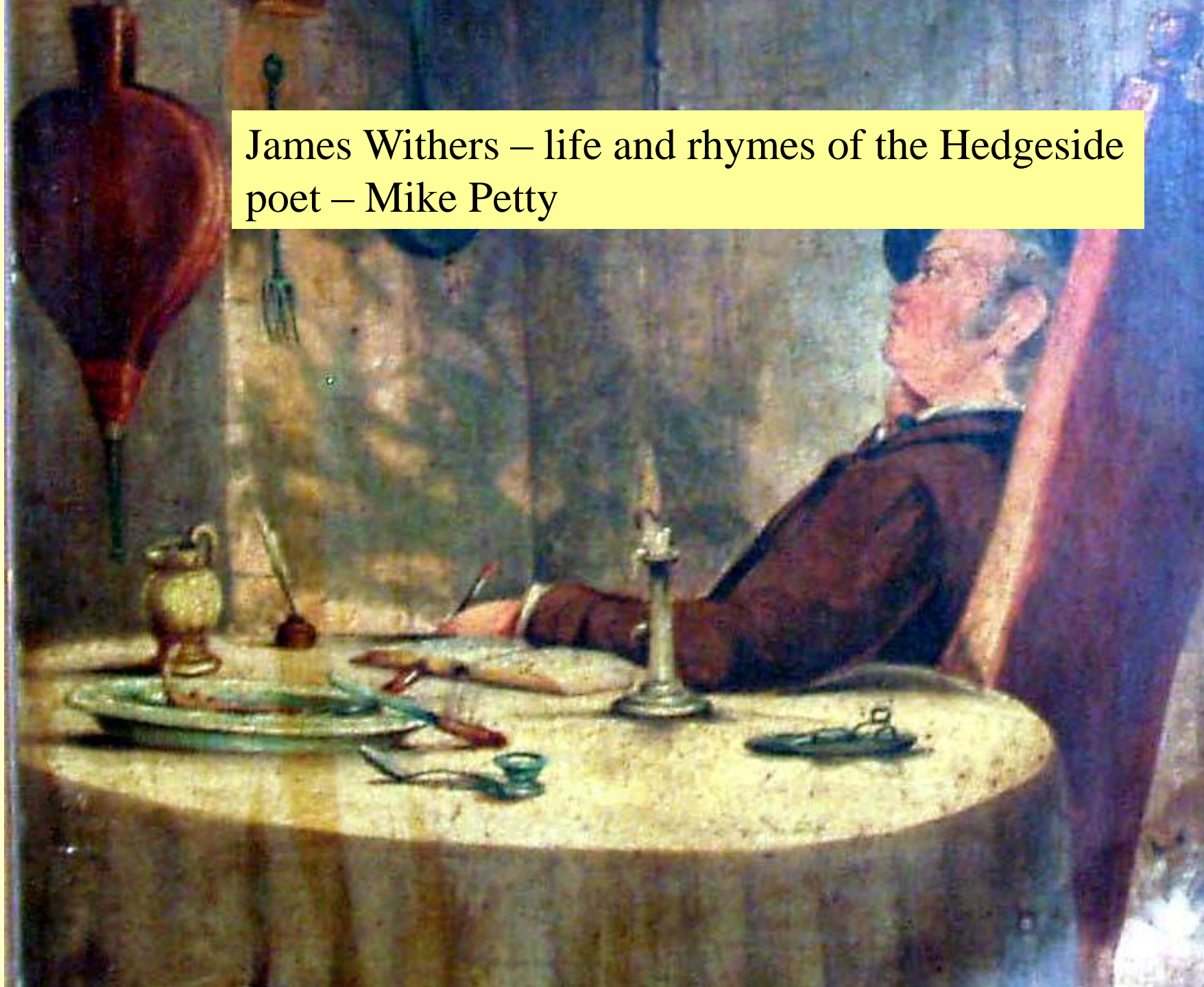
Groups make it easier than

Create Group





James Withers – life and rhymes of the Hedgeside poet – Mike Petty





Oh do not bid me sing  
 I do not do not bid me sing  
 That song I sang in days gone by  
 you do not know the pain it bring  
 To hear that simple melody  
 It brings before me laughing eyes  
 That now are sleeping in the tomb  
 And fill my soul with memories  
 of early friends and early home

That song I sang when I was gay  
 Nor thought this world a world of strife  
 When roses so  
 And all unknown  
 But O we see  
 That youth  
 That friendship  
 Is hardly ev

The Swinging in the Barn  
 the Swinging in the Barn  
 on a dull rainy day  
 when the ground was too wet  
 with our marbles to play  
 & the noise in the glo  
 And the form we could earn  
 & we kicked the high beam  
 on the Swinging in the barn  
 I have Swinging in the boats  
 At the feast on the fair  
 You been whirled in the rot  
 the air

### Preface

Encouraged by many kind friends and a charitable feeling of the  
 public generally on a former occasion I have again ventured to try  
 their patience and forbearance by sending forth a second volume  
 hoping that the Educated and Discreet will not criticise too severely the  
 rustic Song of an untutored muse. I would ask you gentle  
 Reader to be a little blind to the faults (for there are many) or to  
 look upon them in that Spirit of Charity that hides a multitude  
 of sins. Consider that I have had <sup>but</sup> few opportunities for learning when I was a  
 Child <sup>that</sup> no National or British School and my friends  
 were too poor to send me to more expensive ones so I was  
 first taught to read by my Mother and then improved myself  
 and gained what little I now possess by my own untiring love for  
 Books particularly Books of Poetry I am pretty well acquainted  
 with most of our English Poets but

### My Native Village In imitation of Goldsmith's Deserted Village

Dear native village poor yet dear to me  
 Well plac'd again thy smiling woods & se  
 Thy hedge-row green beside the shady lane  
 That oft have screen'd me from the sun or rain  
 Here I again behold the straw roof'd cot  
 The pile of faggots on the garden plot  
 Again I see my happy Childhood's home  
 Still dear to me whatever Change may come  
 Here was the Green whereon we often play'd  
 Of rushes made  
 we used to swing  
 live and salute him  
 round to open the wide  
 German, I said  
 we might gain  
 we again  
 half-ye of  
 our flai  
 ancient dome  
 spread the flame  
 long eyes  
 has and pines  
 green  
 is seen  
 and

# P O E M S.



## My Native Village.

**H**AIL ! native Village ; poor, yet dear to me,  
Well pleased again thy smiling woods I see ;  
Thy hedgerows green beside the shady lane,  
That oft' have screen'd me from the sun or rain.  
Now I again behold the straw-roofed cot,  
The pile of fagots and the garden plot ;  
Once more I see my happy childhood's home,  
Still dear to me whatever change may come.  
Here was the green whereon I've often played,  
Or sat, and caps and whips of rushes made ;

James Reynolds  
Withers was born in  
Weston Colville on  
24th May 1812.





Here in this cot once lived an ancient dame  
Whose pastry through the village spread her famr;  
How have I stood and looked with longing eyes  
When she displayed her prune, her cakes and pies.



Just down the road, beside the bowling green,  
The weather-beaten sign-post still is seen;  
No artist's labour could the host afford,  
But three hot horse-shoes branded on the board

In the old kitchen by the chimney wide  
With foaming ale in good stone mugs supplied  
The old folks talked of times when they were young  
And the same songs, year after year were sung  
'Lord Bateman', 'Spanking Jaack' and 'Black-eyed Sue'  
'Will Watch' and 'Crazy Jane' and 'Bonnets Blue'

- typical of the early ballads that he had learned as a boy





This was his dad's shop. But was it as idyllic as he made out:

Across the garden where was once the green,  
 Hemmed round with houses now and hardly seen,  
 There the shoemaker plied his busy trade,  
 There many pairs of heavy shoes were made.  
 Late through the window gleamed his candle bright,  
 Then up again before the morning light

This was his dad's shop. But was it as idyllic as he made out:

*My Father was a Shoemaker and had some little property, as a House or two and large Gardens, which was all sold and gone before I was born, for I was the youngest of the Family by nine years. The child of my parents old age, and the only Boy, I never remember them but poor, very poor, for my Father was not a provident man; he liked Alehouse Company, and yet at times was of a moody melancholy disposition, so that on my Mother I chiefly depended when a Child for all the little comforts I enjoyed.*

Mary Reynolds  
Her Book it was  
bought Jan<sup>y</sup> the  
18: 1785

She was a careful, industrious, honest, worthy woman. She did a great deal of Needlework, and stich'd, stich'd stich'd from morning till night, or we should often have been without Bread. It was standing at her knee (when she was busy with her needle) that I first learned my letters, for she was too poor to send me to School. Then as I progressed there were so many lessons a day, so many Spellings to get, so many letters to write on a bit of slate, or form into words

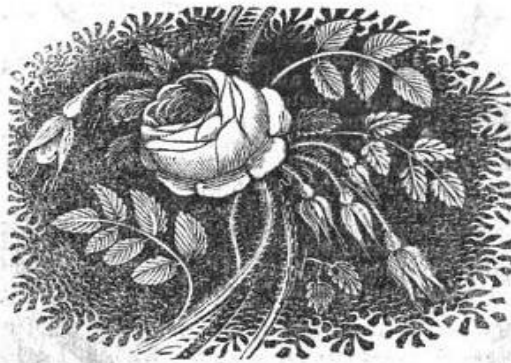
In Remembrance  
of a very wet Harvest  
in the year 1816  
E. W. Halls Stookhill  
field was of brown  
wheat and we had fre  
gleaning on the 23 of Oct.  
the wheat was so muc  
grown that a loaf of bread  
was not thicker then  
a brick and the middle  
so soft that it might  
be daubed on the wall  
Mr Day Weston woods  
ended his Harvest  
Nov<sup>r</sup> the 13 Mr Furn  
ended his Harvest. the 14  
Mr Cocke ended his the 14  
people kept gleaning  
till Dec<sup>r</sup> the 10



'Twas thou, dear mother, taught me first to write,  
And told me in my books to take delight:  
Unceasing was thy love and care for me;  
I all my little learning owe to thee:  
The grass is growing green above thy grave,  
And green the chesnut trees that o'er thee wave;  
Over thy sleeping dust no tomb, no stone,  
No sculptured marble, and thou needest none.  
Thy love to me is on my memory traced  
In lines too deep to ever be erased;

WATTS'  
DIVINE SONGS

FOR THE USE OF  
CHILDREN.



NEW-HAVEN :  
PUBLISHED BY J. BARCOCK AND SON, AND S. BARCOCK  
AND CO. 329 KING-ST. CHARLESTON, S. C.

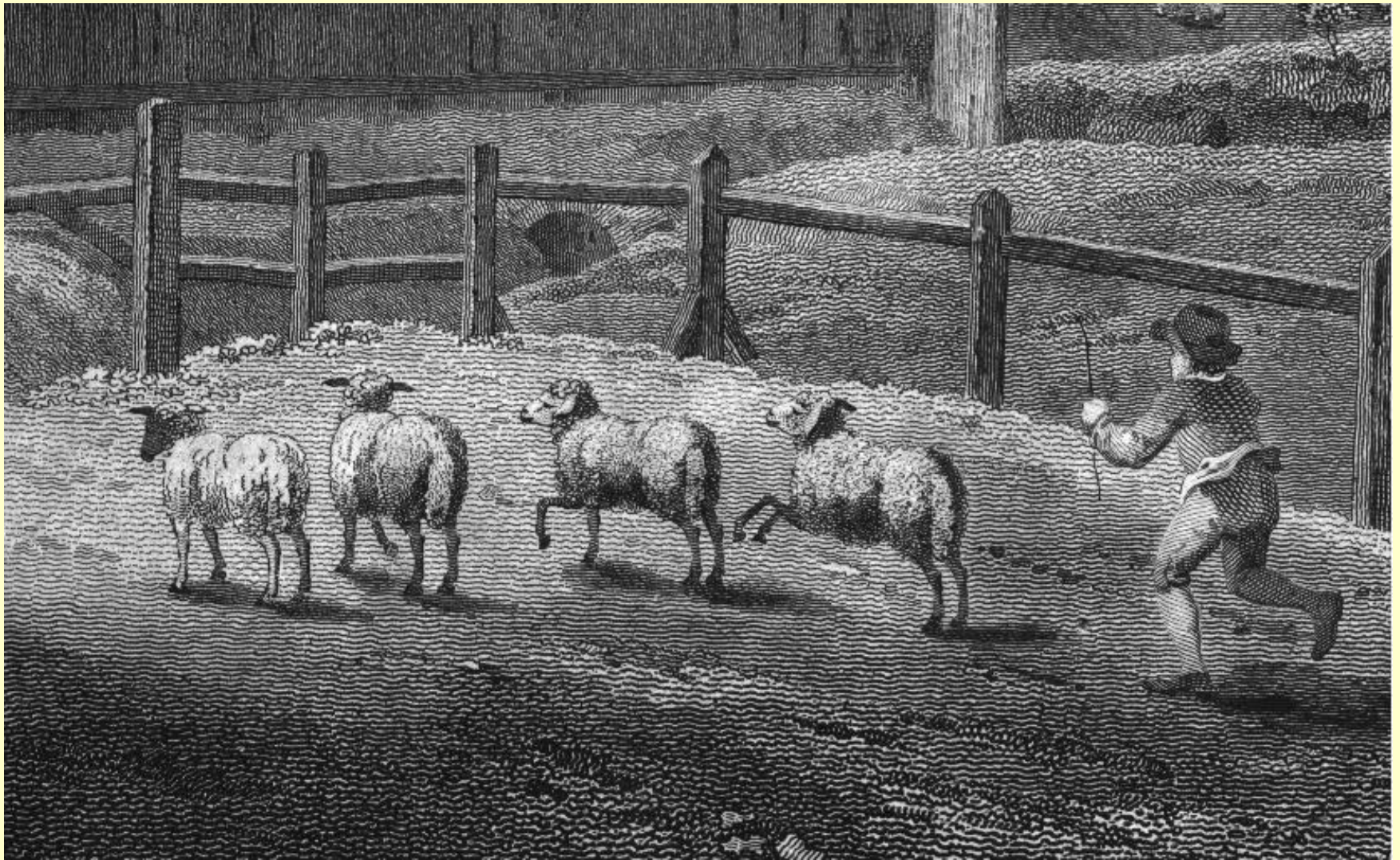
Sidney's Press—1824.

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The NEW  
**Whole Duty of Man.**  
Containing  
The *Faith* as well as *Practice*  
OF  
**A Christian :**  
Made Easy  
For the *Practice* of the *Present Age*.  
As the OLD Whole Duty of Man was designed for  
those unhappy Times in which it was written :  
AND  
Supplying the ARTICLES  
OF  
The Christian *Faith*.  
Which are WANTING in that Book.  
THOUGH  
Essentially necessary to Salvation.  
*With DEVOTIONS proper for several Occasions.*  
L O N D O N,  
Printed for W. BENT, at the King's Arms, Paternoster Row.  
and the other Proprietors.

I never cared much for writing, and figures I knew nothing about - but reading I always liked, and soon was able to make out the Ballads and Catchpennies that found their way into our obscure Village among the woods; and then there was our own scanty Library which contained a Bible and Prayer Book, "The Whole Duty of Man", "The Pilgrims Progress", "The Death of Abel", Watts "Divine Songs for Children", and a tattered copy of Robin Hood's songs; and I remember Robinson Crusoe, but I think that was a borrowed one.

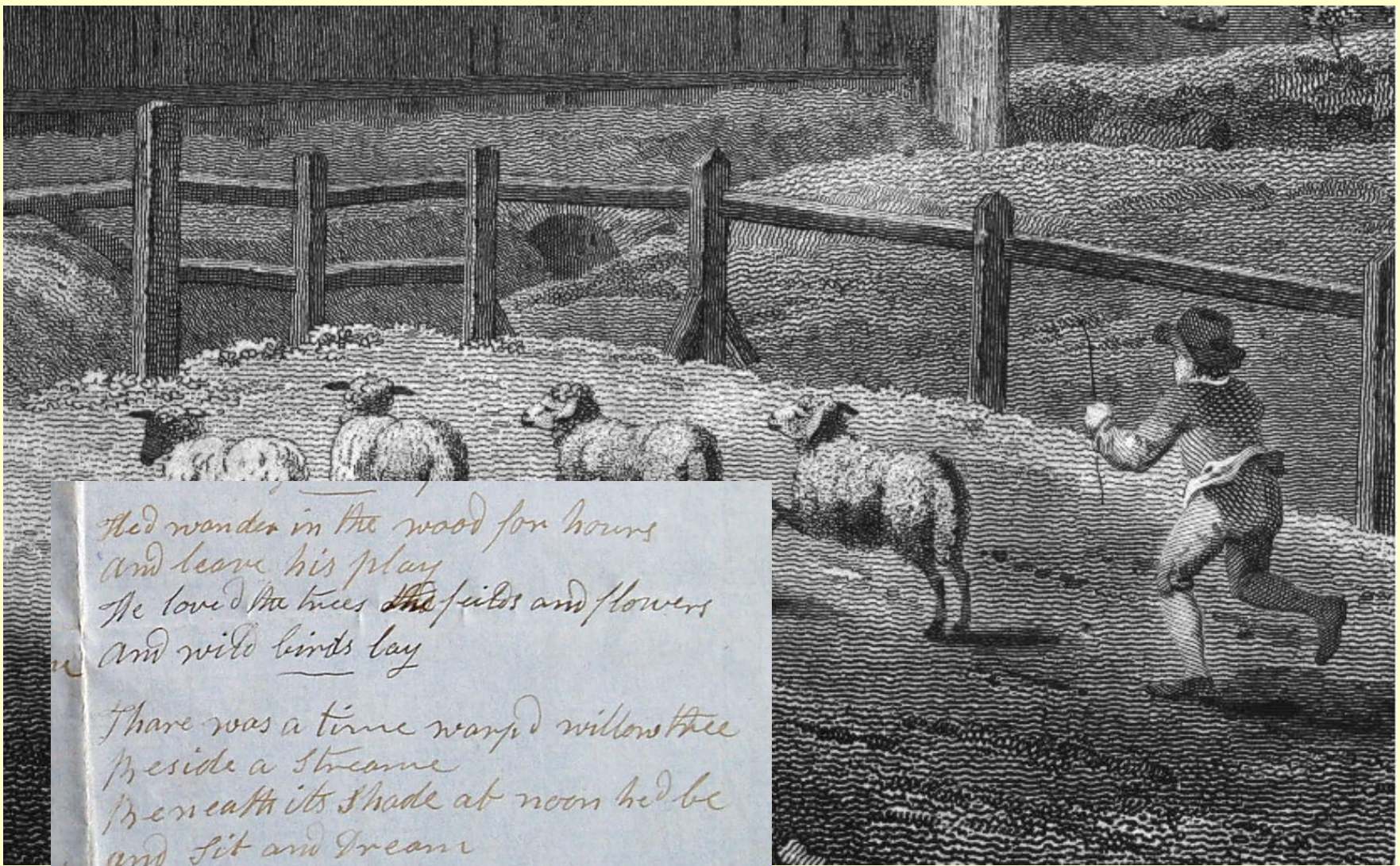




As a boy Withers weeded corn and scared crows and kept sheep where he was often alone. “My wages were two-pence a day, a basin of milk each morning and my Sunday dinner” It was something he enjoyed. As he watched he absorbed something of the natural life around him, the flowers of the fields and the birds – and he composed simple rhymes in their praises

I used to take some of these Books and Ballads with me and pored over them, till I often fancied myself the Hero of the tale I read . I made Bows and Arrows, and was for the lime Robin Hood, or Little John.



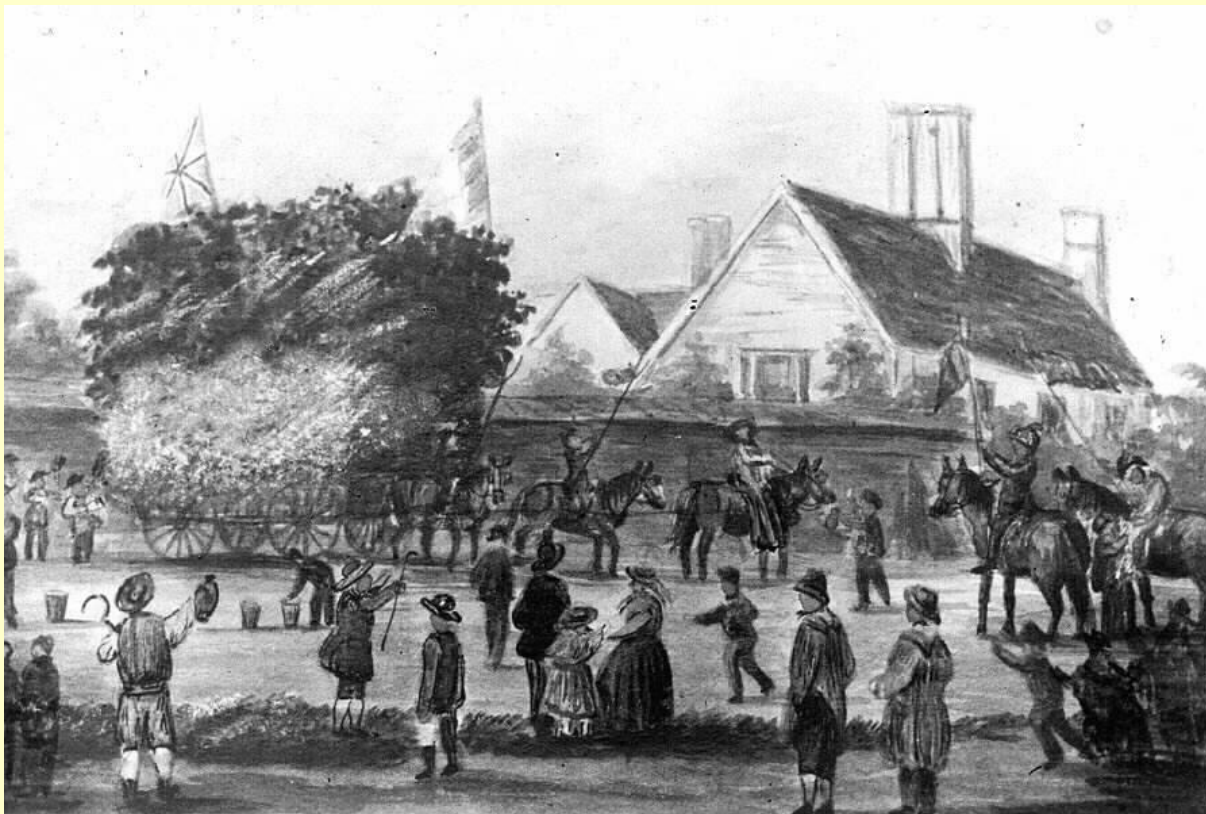


He'd wander in the wood for hours  
and leave his play  
He loved the trees the fields and flowers  
and wild birds lay

There was a time when'd willow trees  
Beside a stream  
Beneath its shade at noon he'd be  
and sit and dream

*Sometimes I forgot my duties and suffered the few sheep to stray into mischief, and two or three times I got a flogging from the Master for my negligence, which I can never forget. Though many would say "it served me right", and perhaps it did, but I could not think so then, whatever I may think now. Oh!, how it rankled and wounded me long after the smarting of my back had pass'd away.*





He was set to work picking stones – a task set by overseers of the poor, in theory to supply material for the maintenance of roads, though a traveller noticed that despite the hoards working the fields, the number of stones did not seem to decrease – others were set to work scattering them back again

Later he weeded the Corn and Gleaned in the Harvest field, but in these employments he had company. *It was when the wheat was sown in Autumn or the Barley in the Spring, and I had to go a Bird Scaring, that my loneliness and Day Dreams returned. "I loved the trees and flowers, woods and waters, and have conversed more with them than with men. I knew the time of the Violets coming, and when the Black Bird built her nest, and many handfuls of flowers I carried home and many Birds eggs too, but always felt some twinges of conscience when I pillaged the beautiful woven nest, for I had learned to love all nature, particularly the wild Flowers of the hedges, woods and Fields, and jingled simple (very simple) rhymes in their praise, that I cannot remember now, or but very few of them, and those so deformed and rickety that I should be ashamed to own them as my children.*



c1824

When aged 12 he was sent to work for a market gardener at Fordham for six years – the first two he had just board and lodgings and for the last received 30s. I stayed my time but I learned but little – there was nothing to learn but what anyone might do – plain digging, hoeing and weeding. He found reading matter in the tattered pages from Shakespeare amongst the waste paper from which he made seed bags and spent some of his little earnings on books

*All this time I never had a companion, I mean not one with similarity of taste, with whom I could have an interchange of ideas, and find a sympathetic feeling. How often I tried to get some of my acquaintances to read or listen to some fine passage that I admired, they would sometimes say "It is very pretty", but I knew they did not feel it, nor care anything about it, and I found that they laughed at me when they were with other young people.*





c1831

When about 19 I went to live at Cambridge. *I had a married sister living there, and she knowing that I could hardly get a living where I was, got me a situation in Magdalene College as under porter; it was considered a good place and my friends thought me very fortunate in obtaining it. There I had the best of living, and the work was not more than I could very well do. But I did not like it, and stayed only about six months. I longed for the green fields and lanes again, for however pinch'd and straitened at Fordham*

I returned to Fordham to my old place and old wage but I could study nature in the day and book in the evening - And I could write my jingling verse without interruption ... but I was often in straightened circumstances and in the winter, perhaps for two months, I had nothing to do. I visited my mother – my father was still living but it was my mother than I clung to most



1836

When I was about twenty three years of age I went back to my native place Weston Colville, and it was in this wise. I had said to my mother that I wished I had learned the shoe making business, and my Grandmother (she was an old woman, over ninety) dying at this time, my mother inherited a little money from her, and always wishing to benefit me as far as her limited means would allow, she paid five pounds and undertook to board me for a year.





*And so I went under the instructions of the man that had been apprenticed to my father, and had got his business, and had bought his houses, and all that once was his. And he had an only son, the same as I was, and I could not help thinking that I ought to have been in his place, so I was bound for one year, and the reason that I went there was, that by boarding and lodging at home, we could do it much cheaper. Only by the greatest economy could she could manage to keep me through the year.*

*Bless her, I never paid her, but I have no doubt that she has been paid, and amply rewarded. She died before my time was out, & then I felt friendless. My father was still living, but he was old & afflicted, & had to be allowed by the parish, so of course could give me no help & if he could have done I never looked up to him as to my mother.*

Then there was a promise that I should be employed in the Shop for another year, and be paid for my work, to gain further knowledge of the trade, so that we hoped that I should then be able to get my own living. But this did not happen



c1838

So he went back to Fordham, where gained a living by mending shoes and sometimes working in the fields at harvest time.

He married, not a rich wife but a good one; she was practical and hard-working, in marked contrast to James who had little aptitude for the practical side of life and was less inclined for exertion, except when moved by his love of the dramatic.

“He delights in the cultivation of his garden and his wife may be seen each day with a cart loaded with its produce, which she is unpoetical enough to offer for sale in the town of Newmarket and the different villages within her route”.

They had four children, a daughter who died in infancy

My child, thou art gone, thou art taken away;  
Thou now art consigned to the cold silent tomb:  
And shall I regret that so short was thy stay  
When thou art removed from the evil to come?

and three who survived, - a girl born 1842 and two boys in 1843 and 1846. But he failed to earn enough to support them. He might be composing verse but they did not put food on the table



## Written from Newmarket Union.

TO MY SISTER AT CAMBRIDGE, 1846.

SINCE I cannot, dear sister, with you hold  
communion,  
I'll give you a sketch of our life in the Union.  
But how to begin I don't know, I declare :  
Let me see ; well, the first is our grand bill of fare.  
We've skilly for breakfast ; at night bread and cheese.  
And we eat it, and then go to bed if we please.  
Two days in the week we have puddings for dinner,  
And two, we have broth so like water, but thinner ;  
Two, meat and potatoes, of this none to spare ;  
One day bread and cheese—and this is our fare.

In 1846 in desperation he turned to Newmarket workhouse for relief, where at least they were fed:

Two days in the week we've puddings for dinner,  
And two we have broth, so like water, but thinner

A sort of Scotch bonnet we wear on our heads;  
And I sleep in a room where there are just fourteen beds  
Some are sleeping, some snoring, some talking, some playing  
Some fighting, some swearing, but very few praying

He returned from the workhouse, picking up what work he could – from a boy I went out to harvest work and was considered a good reaper; I generally picked up my rent in that way.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

### THE BURWELL RIOTS.

*Fordham, Seham, April 9, 1851.*

SIR,—I was much surprised to see a letter from Mr. Ball in your paper of March 15th. He (Mr. Ball) showed me that letter, and asked me my opinion of it. I objected to the latter part of the letter, saying that I thought the reasons he stated were so worded that they would only tend to encourage the men in their present line of conduct; but with regard to the first part of the letter, I told him he was the best judge of vindicating his own character, upon which he promised me that he would not publish the part I objected to. This took place in the presence of the officer commanding the detachment of the Forty-eighth Foot, then quartered at Burwell.

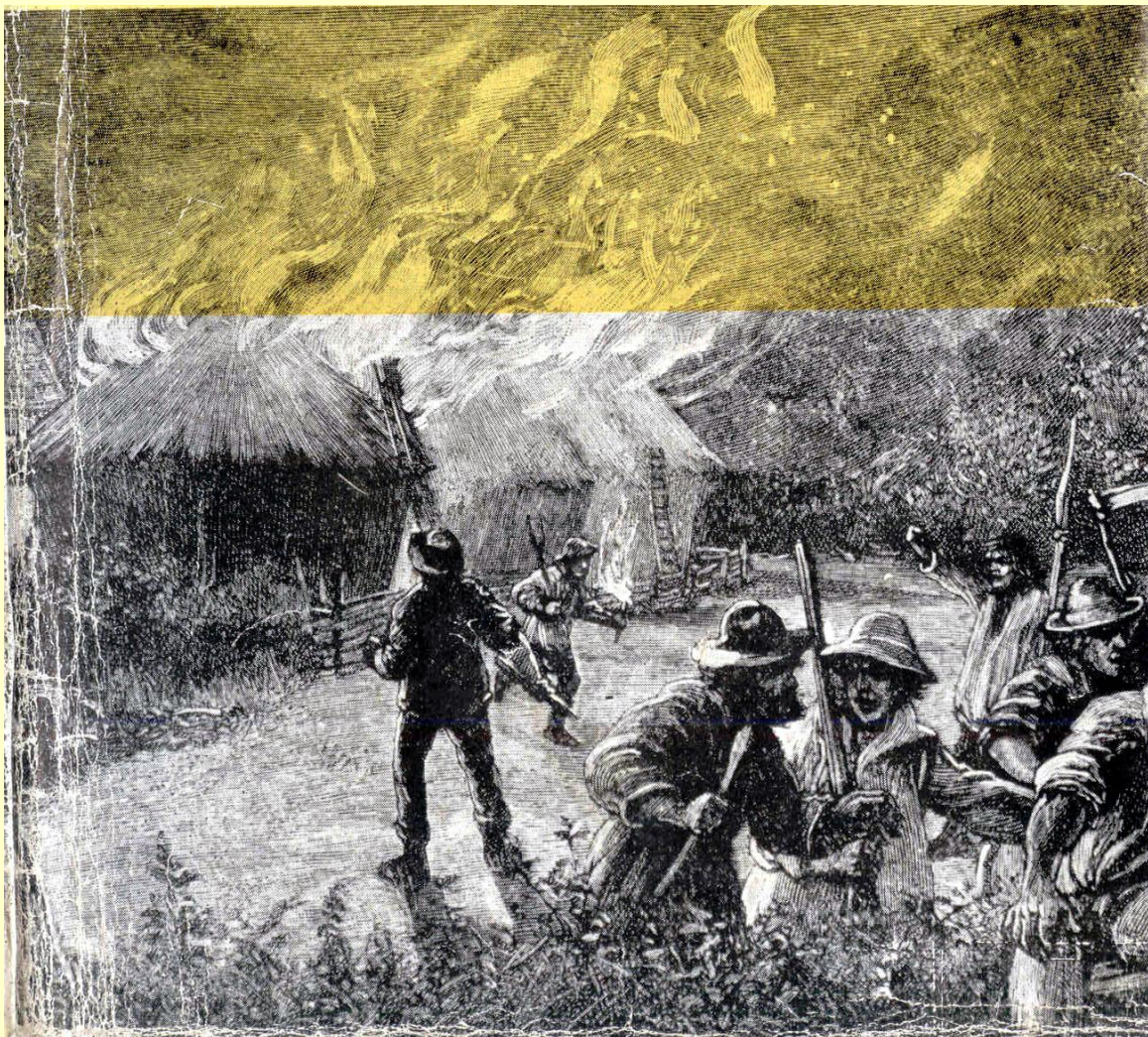
I had before written to you upon this subject, but for some reason the letter was not published. I am now glad it was not, as I am able to forward to you, with this, a copy of the letter I showed to you that Saturday, which I had received from Lieutenant Cairnes, the officer commanding the detachment.

I remain, Sir, yours,  
ALEXANDER COTTON.

COPY OF LIEUT. CAIRNES' LETTER REFERRED TO ABOVE.  
"Weedon Barracks, 3rd April, 1851."

Times were hard: in March 1851 farm labourers' wages were reduced by a shilling a week, which prompted riots. Men toured Fordham and threatened those they found at work; threatening letters were addressed to farmers, a number of Mr Fyson's ploughs were cut and broken to pieces. Magistrates swore in a number of special constables and a number of men committed to gaol.





But it did not stop the protest, Robert Dillamore Fyson's farm near the church was attacked – barns, stables and sheds were set alight, and a quantity of corn with straw and clover stacks totally consumed. Next month, Apr 1851, Arsonists targeted a large barn full of wheat occupied by W.H. Bland, a nurseyman and seedsman; it was totally destroyed and the flames swept across to his stackyard burning turnips and magold wurzels.



30 July 1851

ARSON AT FORDHAM.—William Morley, otherwise Durrant, was indicted for having set fire on the 12th of last March, to a shed in the occupation of Mr. Robert Dillamore Fyson, a farmer living at Fordham.—The principal witness in the case was Lister Dennis, who stated that he and the prisoner left the prisoner's house in Fordham at seven o'clock, and went to Mr. Wilson's house, who is the clergyman of the parish, to ask for relief; but as the bells were ringing for church, they supposed Mr. Wilson would not be able to attend to them, and they turned towards the prosecutor's barn, which stood about a few yards off Mr. Wilson's premises; and the prisoner then swore that he would have something, and attempted to break into the barn. Not being able to effect an entrance, he said to the witness, "I will shew you a scheme, and he immediately got up on to the beam of a thatched shed which adjoined the barn, took a piece of rag steeped in naphtha from his pocket, put it under the thatch, struck a light with a match, and set fire to the rag.

In July one man appeared in court, charged with arson at Fyson's farm

The court was told how the accused

'he took a piece of rag steeped in naphtha from his pocket, put it under the thatch, struck a light with a match, and set fire to the rag' – but he was acquitted



## The Song of the Incendiary.

**W**HEN the wind is loud, and the night is dark,  
And the village is hushed in the arms of sleep,  
And no one near my steps to mark,  
Then away from my home I slyly creep :  
To the barn I glide,  
On the windward side,  
Where the roof slopes low with its crispy thatch :  
There's no one near,  
There's nought to fear,  
And now for the coal or the silent match.

'Tis done, 'tis done, and the flames ascend ;  
Wider they spread and higher they rise:  
Then stealthily home my course I bend,  
While the red glow lights the surrounding skies :

And I join in the throng  
As they sweep along,  
And I shout as loud as the loudest there;  
And the sleepers awake,  
Who fear and quake,  
And can see to dress in the ruddy glare.

Hark, hark, to the mournful low of the cattle;  
And list to the poultry's fearful scream:  
I love the noise, the confusion, and rattle  
Of crackling rafter and falling beam.

To stack and shed  
The flames they spread;  
I joy as the fire flakes upward fly:  
And I love to hear  
That no water is near,  
And I grin with delight when the pumps are dry.

Oh, I love to see on every tree  
The bright flames playing far and wide,  
Making the darkness of night to flee,  
And revealing the things that night would hide.

See, see, how they fall  
On the old Church wall,  
And gild the vane on the old grey tower;  
And dance round the bed  
Of the sleeping dead—  
You may read their names at the midnight hour.

Some love to read of murmuring rills,  
And shady lanes, and flowery vales,  
And waving woods, and sunny hills:  
To me there's no charm in such flimsy tales.



Withers had helped reap for Mr Robert Dillamore Fyson of Fordham; what happened next was significant

“some verses of mine call’d ‘The Song of the Incendiary’ by chance or providence fell into the hands of Mrs R.D. Fyson. And she, thinking they had some merit in them, wished to speak to me, & sent for me to the house. I had hardly ever spoken to her before that time. She then said "that she should like to see anything else that I had written". I told her that I had many more pieces that I should be happy for her to see. And after I had put them in a little order (for they were scribbled on my odd bits of paper) I took them to her & she approved of many of them, & said "She thought we might get up a little book", & we did so.

This lady was a constant friend to me as long as she lived, & assisted me in every way she could. It is to her I owe my first introduction to the Public. She had many friends whom she enlisted to serve me, & they again enlisted their friends & so we got a good list of subscribers, & the little book came out in 1854, dedicated to Mrs Fyson

Could wishes pay thee back the debt –  
The boundless debt I owe to thee  
Then should's't thou ev'ry grief forget  
And life be all felicity

# P O E M S

UPON VARIOUS SUBJECTS:

BY

J. R. WITHERS,

FORDHAM, CAMBRIDGESHIRE.

---

VOL. II.

---

Cambridge:

C. W. NAYLOR, PETTY CURY.

London:

MACINTOSH, PATERNOSTER ROW.

# DEDICATION.

---

THIS SMALL VOLUME IS  
RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED, BY KIND PERMISSION,  
TO  
MISS HALL,  
OF WESTON COLVILLE, CAMBRIDGESHIRE,  
WHOSE KIND AND BENEVOLENT DISPOSITION IS TOO WELL  
KNOWN TO NEED ANY EULOGY,  
FROM HER GRATEFUL AND OBLIGED  
HUMBLE SERVANT,

J. R. WITHERS.

JUNE, 1856.

It was reviewed in several papers & Magazines and followed by a second edition in November 1856 - three shillings with gilt edges, 2s 6d plain. —. Dedicated to Miss Hall of Weston Colville

and a third in 1861

Now his fortunes had improved – he could perhaps feed his wife and children. But Withers did not want to be ‘a useless dunghheap weed’ that ‘rot just where they grow’.





He went to Kings Lynn and undertook a four-day voyage on the stormy deep till he docked in North Shields, sick of the sea and virtually broke. He had to walk home





but he'd seen the coal mines at Durham, Whitby cliffs, Scarborough & Bridlington; he had crossed the Tyne and Tees, climbed steep hills and descended deep dells, seen Lincoln Cathedral and Boston stump and left his tobacco box at Fosdyke Bridge in lieu of twopence, the usual charge for crossing. By the time he returned to his family he was footsore and destitute





AUDLEY END GARDEN CO. LTD.

In 1859 he attracted the attention of one of his greatest supporters, a man famous throughout the gardening world – W Cumming. Cumming was an Aberdonian who had worked in the gardens of the Duke of Devonshire at Chiswick and of Lord Braybrooke at Audley End. In 1841 he settled on the Madingley Road where he worked for the next 30 years – an enthusiastic botanist, winning an open prize from the Royal South London Floricultural Society



“NEGLECTED GENIUS,  
LET ME TURN TO YOU!”

RE-PRINTED AT THE REQUEST OF THE POET'S FRIENDS.

MR. EDITOR,—The d  
ject, above all others, in  
a certain degree, disap  
parallel circumstances in  
heavens above, and we s  
other in size and lustre,  
scattered through the hea  
particular quarter contain  
other conceivable division,  
a large one there, throug  
it is with man. I tell

“Whate'er becomes of mine and me,  
Whate'er our future lot may be,  
Yet one's in heaven.”

I would take this opportunity of publicly returning thanks to all those gentlemen who, through the appearance of my letter, have been induced to assist Mr. Withers, by purchasing his works; more especially to one gentleman who munificently gave two guineas for a single copy; and would only wish others to imitate his example; or, on the other hand, that I could for one day be Chancellor of the Exchequer, for our poet's sake.

I am sorry to hear, a large number of volumes are still unsold, and would pray of gentlemen to come forward and purchase them, to enable the author to issue those now in manuscript.

Any one wishing to obtain copies, can be supplied on application either to the poet or myself.

Yours, &c.,

WILLIAM CUMMING.

*Madingley Road, Cambridge, Jan. 17, 1860.*

Cumming wrote a long letter to the Cambridge Chronicle 31<sup>st</sup> December 1859 talking of the poetic talent of Burns or Byron; but much of their work was unfit to be read in social circles; but in Withers there was not a sentence, not a line or word which could offend the most delicate feeling. When others of his class are joining in the dissipation and drunkenness so prevalent in the lower orders, he wanders into the green meadows and watches the buttercup opening its blossom, or strolled through his shady 'old lane' and jingles his thoughts in rhyme; all nature was poetry to him.



Cumming described how Withers lived in a humble cottage in Fordham, obtaining his living chiefly by mending shoes but compelled by pinching poverty to eke out a subsistence by the harvest field, or any other honest means; and so hard has miserable want pursued him that more than once he has been driven with his family to the Newmarket Union, refusing credit offered to him (his fears overcoming his hopes of ever being able to repay the debt). It was high time something should be done to prevent him from again entering the doors of the Union; could not some of those influential gentlemen who have kindly patronised his works put the matter into a proper channel that Withers might come under the notice of her Majesty, who has for ever proved herself ready to assist the man of genius and would no doubt sympathise with the misfortunes of this humble but talented individual and something permanent would be done to keep him away from misery, beggary and the workhouse ... for I feel sure that when he has passed away  
Then England with exulting tear  
Shall boast that Withers was her son

Cummings wrote letters, received donations and sold copies of the books at 5s a time, raising upwards of £5. It was owing to Mr Cumming's exertions – the Chronicle reported in 1871 - in drawing attention to his works, that Withers received due recognition from those high in social as well as literary rank and in consequence Withers had been placed above the sphere of physical want in which Mr Cumming had found him



"Come away into the Woodlands"  
Addressed to Miss Haylock Balsham.

Come away into the woodlands, for the winter time is gone  
And Spring is full of promises of the Summer coming on  
The air is fresh and balmy, the birds are singing free  
And bursting are the glaucous buds, yet  
I know a shelter'd hollow, where  
And glad some looking daisies, are  
With blue bells and anemones, to  
Oh, the dearest time of year is, now  
There's freshness in the furrows, now  
There's rosy health upon the breeze, that sweeps across the down,



There were other supporters: He penned a poem 'Come away into the woodlands' addressed to Miss Haylock of Balsham



Treasury,  
Whitehall, S.W.  
27 February 1860

Sir,

I am commanded by the Lords  
Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury, to  
acquaint you that upon the recommendation  
of Viscount Palmerston the Paymaster  
General has been authorized to pay to you the  
sum of £50 — " — " —, as of Her Majesty's  
Royal Bounty.

In case it is inconvenient to attend  
personally at the Office of the Paymaster General,  
that Officer, upon application being made to him  
by letter, will cause a form of receipt to be furnished,  
which can be negotiated through a Banker.

I am,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

Leo Hamilton

Mr J R Withers  
of Fordham  
care of Miss Haylock

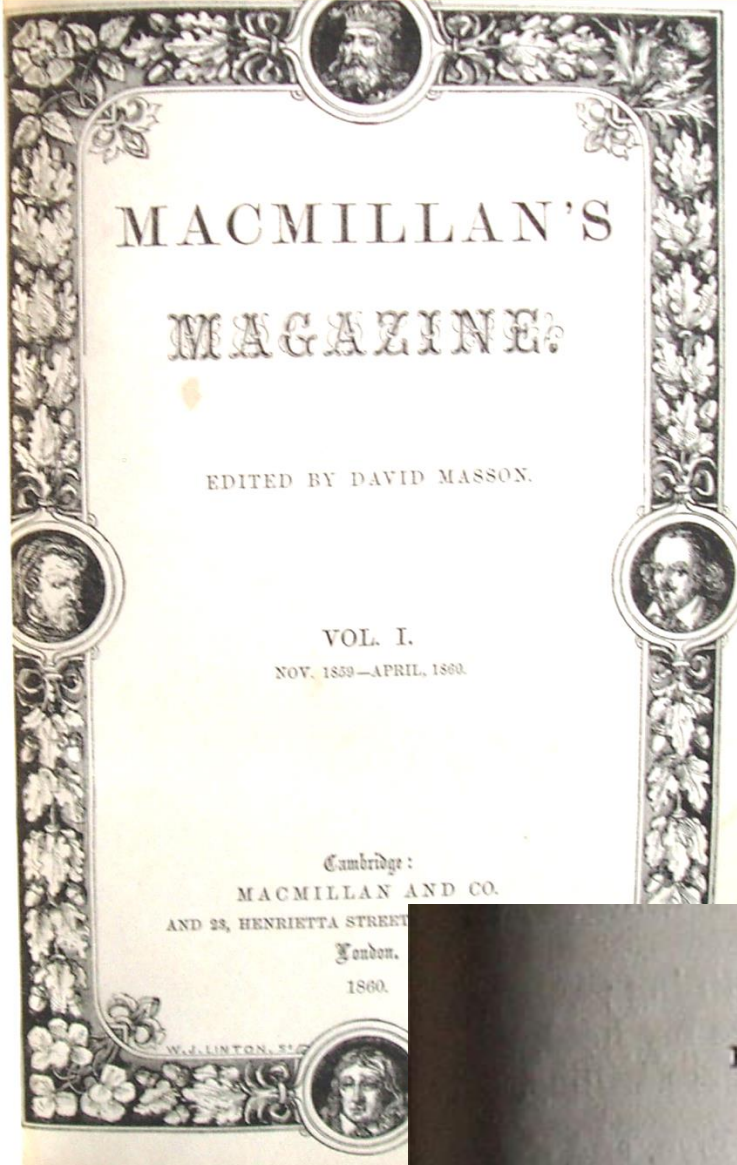
Balsham Pla<sup>ce</sup>

near Sutton

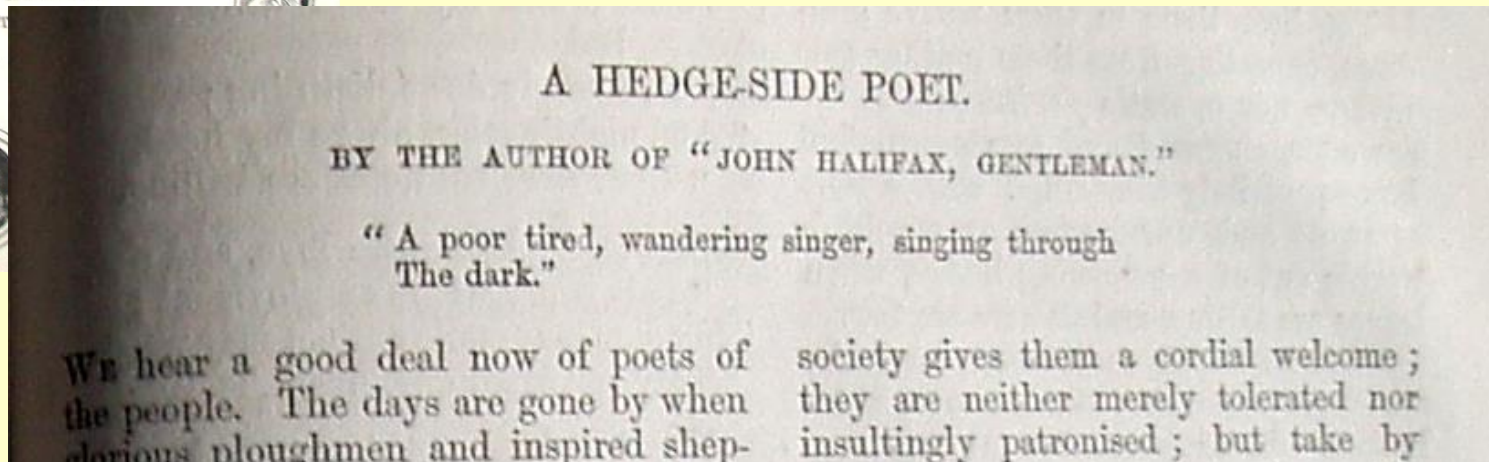
Cambridgeshire

N.Y.

who on her own responsibility, had written to the Prime Minister, Viscount Palmerston and Withers received a grant of £50 (about £4,200 today) from the Queens Bounty, another £50 from the Duke of Rutland with another £10 from a Literary Fund. This enabled him to place his two sons in a way of earning their living — 1860



Most importantly he attracted the attention of Dinah Maria Mulock who'd recognised a kindred spirit: she had written her first verse when aged ten and in 1846, despairing at her father's neglect of his family, had taken her invalid mother and two small brothers to London, where she supported them by her literary efforts. She was fortunate in receiving encouragement and had married a partner in the publishing firm of Macmillan who had a shop in Cambridge. In Macmillans Magazine for April 1860 she praised Withers' verse and dubbed him the Cambridgeshire hedge-side poet





## Opinions of the Press.

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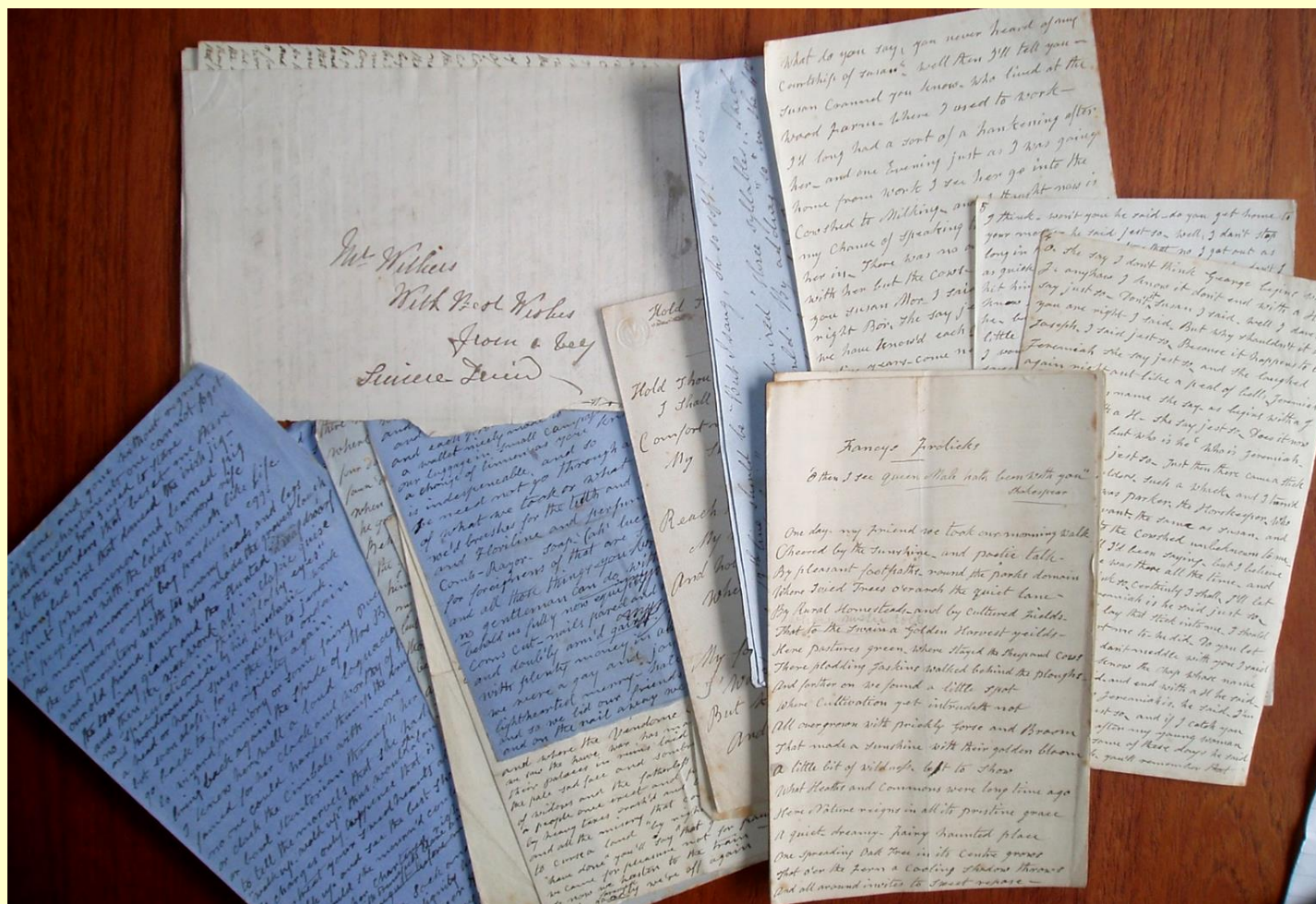
“He has an ear attuned to harmony—a heart alive to feeling: and the simplicity, the freshness, and the naturalness by which “his native wood notes wild” are distinguished, cannot fail to be agreeable to everyone whose poetic taste is pure and uncorrupted by the outravagancies of the spasmodic school of poetry.”—*Birmingham Journal*.

“It is peculiarly as a poet of nature that he may be admired, for peculiarly in this respect does he seem to be gifted. Nature, to him, may be said to be a volume never ending either in subject or attraction, always beautiful and at all times suggestive. His inspiration is that of the soul, and his effusions, more especially those which have reference to rural scenes, are full of truth, simplicity, and sweetness.”—*Cheltenham Examiner*.

“There is scarcely a piece which does not contain some elevated thought, or fine fancy, or delicate sentiment, or natural and pleasing imagery, while several poems as a whole would do no discredit to a lyric bard of acknowledged excellence. Mr. Withers’ distinguishing trait is a love of nature, with whom in all her varied moods he exhibits a profound sympathy. He has humour as well as fancy, which several playful pieces testify; but his prevailing tone is that which is usually begotten of rural tranquility and peace, hallowed, we are happy to say, by much of religious feeling.”—*Patriot*.

His story had great appeal and was picked up by other papers. The Stamford Mercury commented: As a poor farm labourer and occasional cobbler Withers has hitherto enjoyed very little of the smiles of fortune; his path has been a rough and stormy one; the tempests of poverty and misfortune have clouded the greater portion of his life ... In his adopted village of Fordham he still pursues his humble avocations but it is to be hoped that before long some means will be found to place him in a less toilsome and more remunerative position.





More poems followed, in May 1860 several hundred copies of the first and second volumes had been reissued, these at 6/- per copy with payment in postage stamps or order - Withers first started work he was earning seven shillings a week - Bury Post 29 May 1860.

Withers continued to compose:

He wrote of flowers, honey-suckle, snow and streams, the fate of a poor old mill -

- but he also addressed the problems of the time, such as cholera which had broken out in Nov 1853

## Cholera

I'm coming, I'm coming, the scourge of mankind  
I float on the water & ride on the wind  
Gaunt hunger and squalor prepare my way  
In the huts of the wretched my sceptre I lay  
In filthy damp alleys and courts I reign  
O'er the stagnant pool and the putrid drain  
I breathe on the child and its gambols are done  
I seize on the youth and his beauty is gone  
The maid in her bloom and the man in his pride  
And age in his wrinkles I lay side by side  
I take to day the child from the breast  
To-morrow the mother with grief distressed  
The father with toil and care oppressed  
I send the next day where the weary rest  
The dearest friend's arduous I part  
And I laugh at the skill of the healing art  
The yawning grave and the tolling bell  
The nightly unnumbered funeral  
The houses forsaken the grass grown green  
Where the bounding step of health had been  
The care worn look of manly you meet  
And the morners that goeth about the street  
Tell the horror I make and to none do I bow  
But to him that appointeth how far I shall go  
J.R. within

I'm coming, I'm coming, the scourge of mankind  
I float on the waters, I ride on the wind:  
Great hunger and squalor prepare my dread way  
In filthy damp alleys and courts I reign  
O'er the dark stagnant poor and putrid drain;  
The maid in her bloom, and the man in his pride,  
And age in his wrinkles, I lay side by side  
I take the infant to-day from the breast-  
Tomorrow the mother with grief distressed –  
The father, with care and toil oppress  
I send the next day where the weary rest

## Bury and Norwich Post – Wednesday 09 November 1853

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Print Download Bookmark Tag Comment Buy Print Page 3 of 4

At Wicken the cholera has made its appearance. There have been two cases. Every means are used to arrest its progress.

At Isleham, also, two deaths have taken place.

**FORDHAM**—Owing to the alarming increase of cholera at Soham, a public meeting was called at **Fordham**, on Monday, the 31st ult., to adopt active measures for the prompt removal of every nuisance in the place, and the following gentlemen were appointed a Committee:—W. D. Gardiner, Esq.; Rev. J. Peniston; Messrs. Miller (surgeon) **Fyson**, Dennis, Seaber, R. Dennis, Townsend, &c., &c.

**NATIONAL SCHOOL**.—At a public meeting held in the vestry on Monday last, W. D. Gardiner, Esq., in the chair, a Committee was appointed to take into consideration the best means of rendering useful to the village the National School, which has for some time past been of very little service to the place, and is now quite closed.

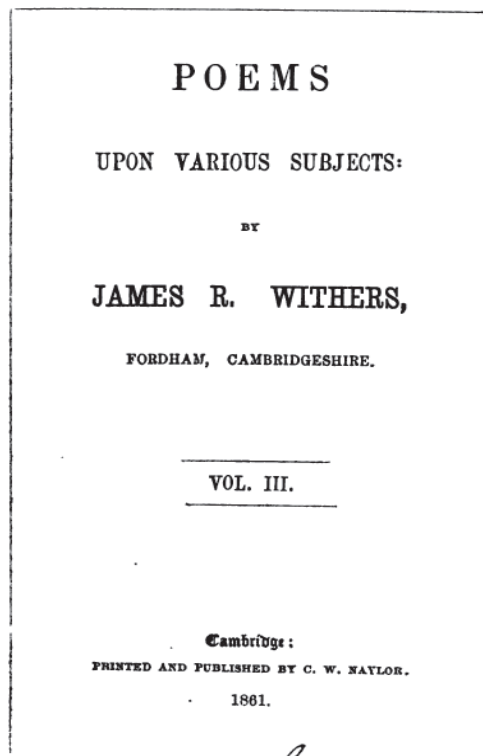
The *Times* newspaper is now stamped while being pointed. The stamp die is fixed in the form to the left of the title, over the centre of the first column. A rever

It is be elect this city. NORW the sub trustees Mr. Fra Mr. R at Apotl certifica ATTE petrate prevaler Sunday young 1 Spitalfie thorpe-s seized hi till he w pockets, was in a Being u to the o Where am I? 15 vo



Sometimes inspiration faltered - The fire of sticks  
I sat by the fire, t'was late in the night  
And I wanted a subject on which I could write.  
Not one could I find that had not been used,  
And my mind was a chaos, confusion confused.



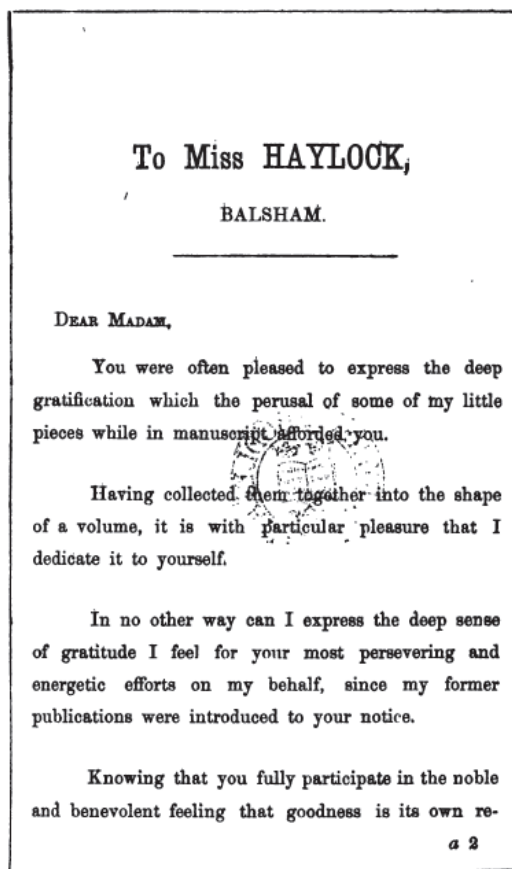


280. h. 104

Myles Francis Golding from Abington appealed for the names of subscribers for a third volume of Withers poems; the price would be 5/- for which it would be sent, post-free. It was issued in April 1861 dedicated to Miss Haylock and patronized by Cambridgeshire nobility, by Charles Dickens and even Martin Tupper – Martin who. Now dismissed as a third-rate Victorian poet, Tupper was in the 1860s a favourite writer of Queen Victoria and being tipped as a future poet Laureate. Withers himself was mentioned in the same breath as Burns, Wordsworth, Byron – even John Clare.

He was offered a post at one of the London parks, with free residence, but he preferred to stay at Fordham

It seemed all had come good at last for the hedgeside poet



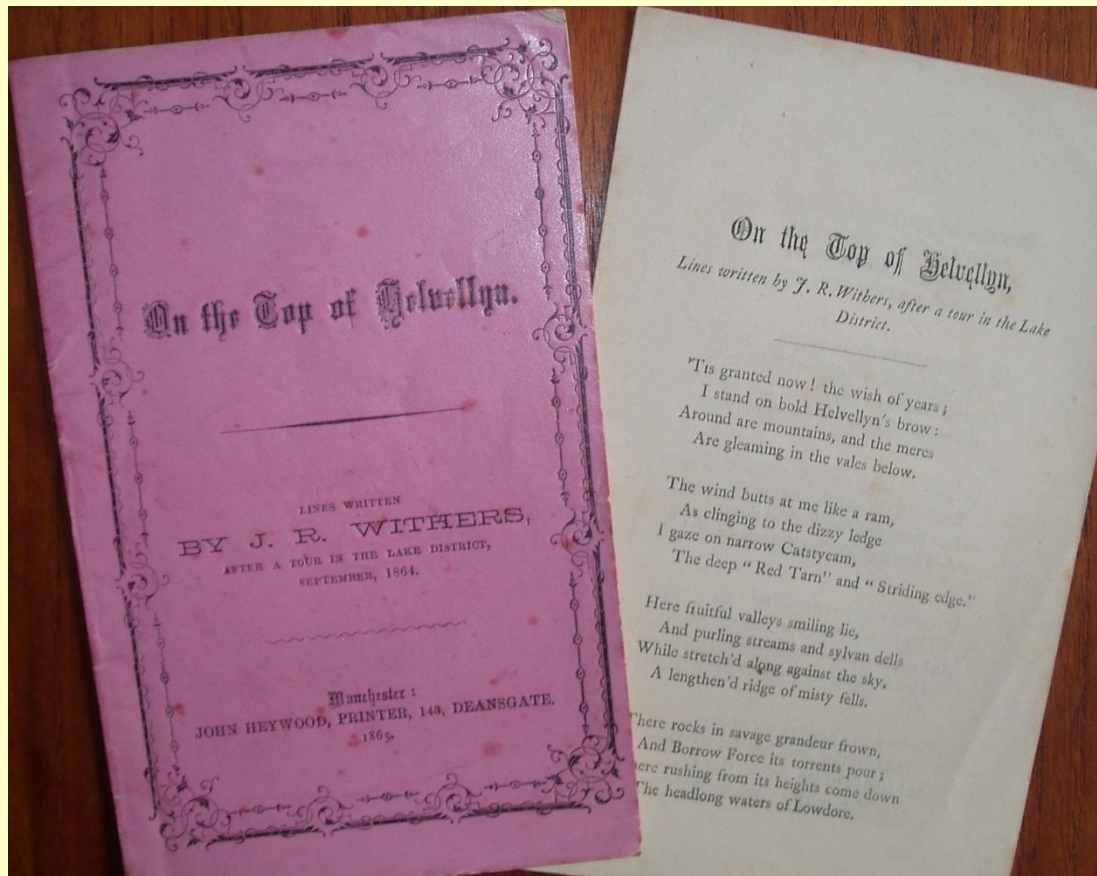
PATRONIZED BY  
His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales.

His Grace The DUKE OF LEEDS.  
The Right Honourable the COUNTESS OF HARDWICKE.  
The Right Honourable LADY ADELIZA MANNERS.  
The Right Honourable LORD GEORGE MANNERS.  
The Right Reverend The LORD BISHOP OF WORCESTER.  
CHARLES DICKENS, Esq.  
MARTIN TUPPER, Esq.

Abbott, Miss, Ipswich.  
Acton, Rev. W., Weston Colville.  
Adams, Mrs: H., Beverley.  
Alderson, Miss, Corn Hill, Ipswich.  
Anonymous.  
Archer, Goodwin, Esq., Ely.  
Adams, Rev. R., Norton, Stockton-on-Tees.  
Anderson, Miss, Balsham Place, 2 copies.  
Allen, Dr., Wellington House, St. John's Wood.  
Ashby, M., Esq., Staines, 2 copies.  
Aspland, A., Esq., Dukensfield, 2 copies.

Bailey, Mr. J. F., Cambridge.  
Bailey, Mrs., Worlington Cottage.  
Baldry, Mr., Cambridge.  
Bath, Miss, Balsham, 2 copies.  
Beeton, Jane, 7, Devonshire Square, London, 2 copies.  
Barber, Mrs., Crouch Hill, Hornsey Rise.





Withers was now free of poverty and he undertook a grand tour, visiting Slough, Windor Castle, Eton College and the churchyard where Grey wrote his Elegy. Then it was on to High Wycombe, Gloucester and Stroud, to Monmouth and Bristol and Bath 'bowled on from one friend to another, staying with each a few days and receiving great kindness from all'. He was frequently in London, a welcome guest at many literary gatherings

He visited Paris toured the Lake District, climbing to the top of Helvellyn And travelled round the south travelling from Slough to High Wycombe, Stroud, Gloucester and Minsterworth bowled on from one friend to another, staying with each a few days ... perhaps he overstayed his welcome – replying to an invitation to dine with a friend at Newmarket:

An Answer to an Invitation to  
Dine with a Friend at Newmarket

Dear Sir

(visit on Sunday

As you've asked me to pay you a  
I think I shall come and stay with you, till Monday  
So I hope that for dinner you'll get something nice,  
And don't be deter'd by the trouble or price -  
You need not get much, for I'm not such a Glutton  
If I might suggest, say a Boiled Leg of Mutton,  
With Caper Sauce, Turnips, and Greens, and all that,  
And three Ribs of Beef, nicely tender, and fat,

As you've asked me to pay you a visit on Sunday  
I think I shall come and stay with you till Monday  
So I hope that for dinner you'll get something nice,  
And don't be deterred by the trouble or price

You need not get much, for I'm not such a glutton  
If I might suggest, say a boiled leg of mutton,  
With caper sauce, turnips and gravy and all that  
And three ribs of beef, nicely tender and fat ...

Then a couple of fowls, and a rabbit or hare  
And some fish if you like, but for that I don't care ..

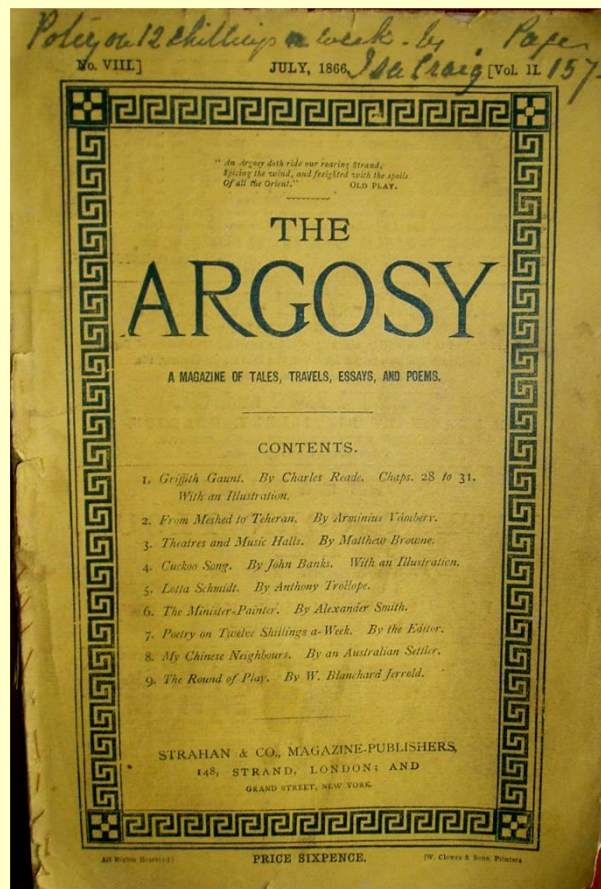


## GRANNY'S TALE.

It was one summer's evening when I was sweet eighteen,  
The lads were merrily at play at football on the green ;  
All helter-skelter here and there, with noisy shout and yell ;  
I went across to fetch a pail of water from the well.

Returning with my bucket full I rested at the stile,  
There first I saw my Joseph, and caught his winning smile ;  
He was so tall and handsome, so young and full of glee,  
He kick'd the ball with such a force it bounded up to me.

I felt confused, for all the lads were round me in a swarm,  
And Joseph foremost of them all, his face was flush'd and warm,  
His jacket wide unbutton'd flew, said he "my pretty lass,  
I'll carry home your pail for you," and step'd along the grass.



In 1866 he issued 'Granny's Tales' in which an old grandmother tells the story of her courtship — Argosy Jul 1866 reviewed — 'one of the most charming and interesting ... their theme was so graceful and gay it seemed as if they must be the production of some young poet ... but they were written by an old man who has borne the burden of half-a-century of poverty and toil. Withers recalled: I wrote from pure imagination

JUST PUBLISHED, PRICE ONE SHILLING,

# The Magic Flute, A COMIC DRAMA,

BY JAMES R. WITHERS, OF FORDHAM, CAMBRIDGESHIRE,

Author of "GRANNY'S TALE," "RUSTIC SONGS," &c.

NOTICE BY ETA MAWR, AUTHOR OF "FAIR AND NEAR," "ULASKI," &c.

Mr. WITHERS is no new claimant of public notice or appreciation. His merits as a poet and a man have long been known and acknowledged, far beyond his own locality. Endowed with the most versatile talents, pathos and humour blend in his compositions—effusions let us rather say—for they flow spontaneously from his thoughtful head and feeling heart.

Nature, who is no respecter of persons, but impartially showers down her gifts—now on the nobleman in his palace—now on the peasant at his plough—has most liberally endowed him with every benefaction save the goods of fortune, and enrolled him in the noble band of plebeian poets with Burns, Bloomfield, Crabbe, and let us add, one of the best of British poetesses—Janet Hamilton. Born to low estate—an agricultural labourer—self-educated and seeking companionship alone with nature and with books—of him might truly be said, as of a higher votary of the Muse,\*

"His soul was like a star, and dwelt apart."

But it shone out at last, too bright to be concealed: his merits were discovered—may they be rewarded!

The two little poems before us are admirable illustrations of that versatility of talent which we have justly attributed to our author. *Granny's Tale* has a charm for old and young universally felt and acknowledged, and which has carried it speedily and triumphantly to a second edition. Readers of Tennyson cannot but favourably compare it with the superannuated old "Grandmother" he has depicted, confounding her sons with her grandsons, and a dead child with her living ones—a mere pitiable object of senile decay. What a contrast to the bright intelligent old dame, whose memory retains the minutest incidents, and who so pleasantly retraces the story of her own young life to her blooming granddaughters, her attentive and delighted auditors! The two pictures might well stand opposed to each other in Rembrandt tints of light

\* Milton.

and shadow—equally true to nature perhaps, but who does not prefer the bright side of Nature to the gloomy and the dark?

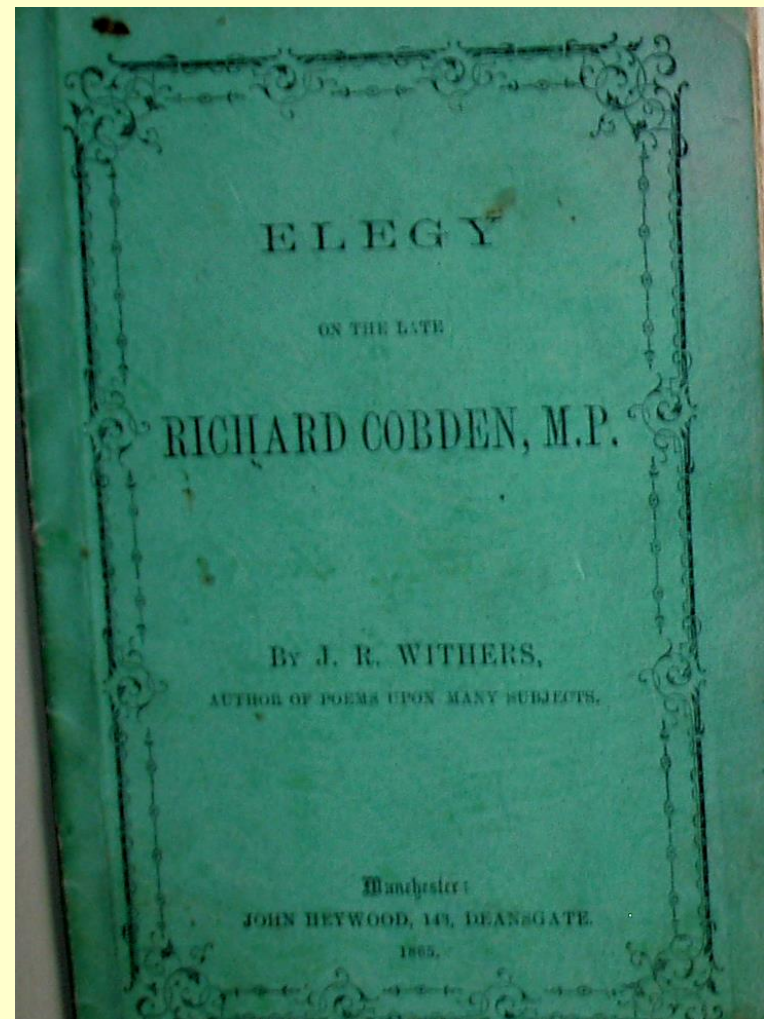
*The Magic Flute* has a merit even beyond its exuberant wit and humour, in the truthfulness with which, according to the times they lived in, the characters have been portrayed. The saucy and neglected boy, but with the germs of so much good in him under proper cultivation—the angry yet relenting father, softened by the memory of his first wife—the vulgarly spiteful and malicious stepmother—are all admirably drawn. Nor are the other characters, historical and social—the pompous and self-important but weak-minded successor of the great Elizabeth—the superstitious intolerant Parson—and the imperious exacting Justice—less true to the portraits of history and the character of the times. It is no exaggerated encomium to say that these varied portraits take Shakespearian touches at the hands of our author. Yet is he no imitator; his genius bears the impress of genuine originality. Taking sweet counsel with Nature, his own familiar friend, he looked only to her for guidance and inspiration.

"Formed by her converse happily to steer  
From grave to gay, from lively to severe."

Never were those often-quoted lines more happily exemplified than in these kindred yet contrasted poems. In one—latent humour quivers over the serious recital like flickerings of the summer lightning—in the other, a serious moral perpetually underlies the exuberant drollery, and shines out, at length, in Reason's address at the conclusion, in true and noble poetry.

If our readers have a true taste for that they will cordially concur in these our sincere and impartial opinions. Sincere, or they would never have been written—impartial, for their writer is unacquainted with the author, save by report and in his poems.

To be had of the Author, JAMES R. WITHERS, Fordham, Cambridgeshire.



He published a comic drama, "The Magic Flute" which was founded on a tale of an old woman that I knew – "a merit even beyond its exuberant wit and humour" –

He wrote an Elegy on Richard Cobden, MP – by J.R. Withers 'author of poems upon many subjects



"Bull's eyes" and "lollipops," the urchins' treat,  
 And all the various forms that sugar takes  
 In "drops" and "toffy," "lozenges" and "cakes,"  
 With "nuts," and "oranges," and "prunes," and "figs,"  
 Have lost their places—certain as the "Whigs."  
 No more the fairings bought for "Mary Ann"  
 Shall bulge the pockets out of her "young man."  
 Nor children wait, with watching, wakeful eyes,  
 For father's bringing home the promis'd prize;  
 Then after they've devoured the luscious store,  
 With sticky fingers search his coat for more;  
 The little gourmands (having ate their fill)  
 Pay for the feast next day by being ill.  
 Some carry home a "horse," a "doll," and some  
 A "trumpet," "penny whistle," or a "drum,"  
 Making the house a "Babel" with their noise;  
 But (what a blessing!) there's no *last* in toys.  
 All this has pass'd away—mourn, youngsters, mourn,  
 The fair's departed, never to return.

Just by the "Bells" I saw a luckless wight,  
 His waistcoat with pearl buttons all bedight,  
 Dark corduroys his nether limbs did deck,

# Farewell to the Fair:

A POEM

BY

J. R. WITHERS.

Newmarket:

PRINTED BY GEORGE SIMPSON, BOOKSELLER.  
1877.

Not one familiar face I used to know,  
 No "shooting gall'ries," not one blessed "show,"  
 No "old Aunt Sallys" to bring in the pence,  
 No heroes of the art of self defence.  
 Where are the "penny spins," the "weighing chair,"  
 The "battery," that made the "bumpkins" swear,  
 The painted "horses," whirl'd around by steam,  
 The "organ's tootings" and the "engine's scream,"  
 The "swinging boats," where "kids" delighted ride,  
 The tents, where savoury "sausages" were fried,



FORDHAM.

## The Church Restoration.

OUR forefathers in ancient days  
Did to the Lord this temple rear,  
Wherein they offered prayer and praise,  
And their descendants worshipped here.

Here children's children, sire and son,  
In lowly reverence did bow,  
Unceasing as the years rolled on  
Adown the stream of life till now.

Here they received each holy rite  
That dwells in Symbol and in Sign;  
At Font and Altar vows would plight,  
And took the mystic bread and wine.

Their unrecorded lives were passed  
In humble hope and simple trust,  
'Till, worn with toil and age, at last  
They mingled with their kindred dust.

And thus the peaceful house of God  
Was linked to them by sacred ties,  
They loved the green surrounding sod,  
Where nameless heaving hillocks rise.

Here was the white-robed infant brought,  
And here the blushing bride was led,  
Here were the Holy Precepts taught,  
And here in hope they laid their dead.

2

And who, that mourns not friend removed—  
Some child, to heart and memory dear—  
A wedded partner fondly loved—  
Parent or brother garnered here?

But time, with ever-nibbling tooth,  
Silent, insidious, and slow,  
Without distinction, without ruth,  
That preys on all things here below,

His scathing mark on it has left,  
As crumbling stones and beams display,  
And, year by year, with treacherous theft,  
Has filched its grace and strength away.

3

Ever the first, in works of skill,  
In all that's tasteful and refined,  
With ready hand, and earnest will,  
To consummate the task assigned,

To them our fervent thanks we owe,  
For their assistance, kindly given;  
We wish them happiness below,  
And more enduring joys in heaven.

Thanks, too, to those whose ample means  
Have beautified the sacred Fane,  
With Carvings chaste, and Holy Scenes  
Emblazoned on the "Storied pane."





# POLLY BANYARD'S EXPERIENCE.

## "AN OWRE TRUE TALE."

I said to myself, one Sunday, said I,  
"They talk a great deal of Dissenters ;  
'Tis a long way to church, and the meeting's close by,  
So to-day I will go to the Ranters.

"My currants are off, and my gooseberries done,  
And now there's the pears and the apples ;  
The boys will be here, if they know I am gone ;  
But they don't keep you long at the chapels.

But there were other congregations - Polly Banyard's experiences deciding which congregation to join at Fordham

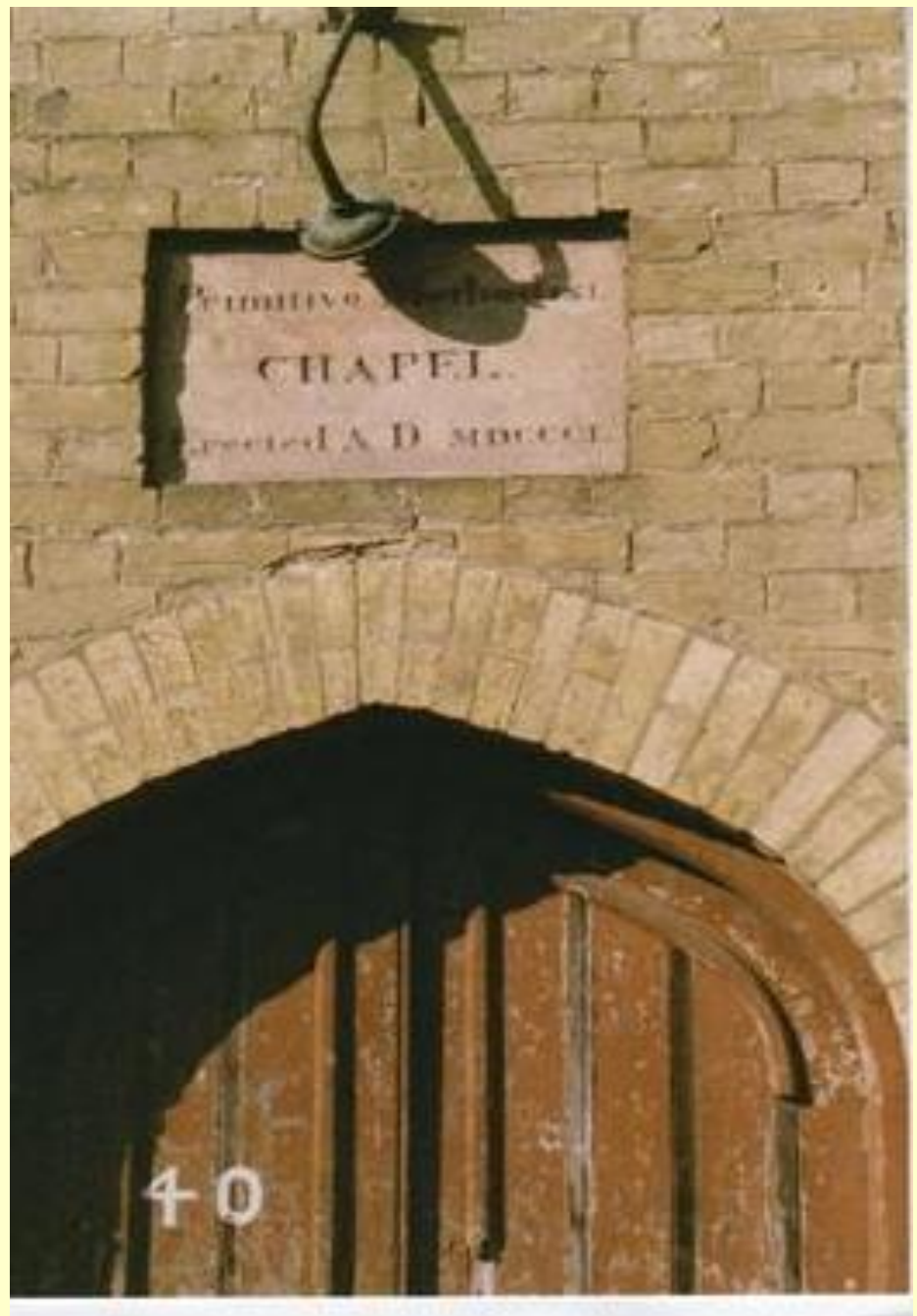
I said to myself, one Sunday, said I,  
They talk a great deal of Dissenters;  
'Tis a long way to church, and the meeting's close by,  
So today I will go to the Ranters.

Well I went to the Ranters, they preached and they prayed,  
And they asked me to join their connexion  
But I found for all this they expect to be paid  
As afterwards came the collection

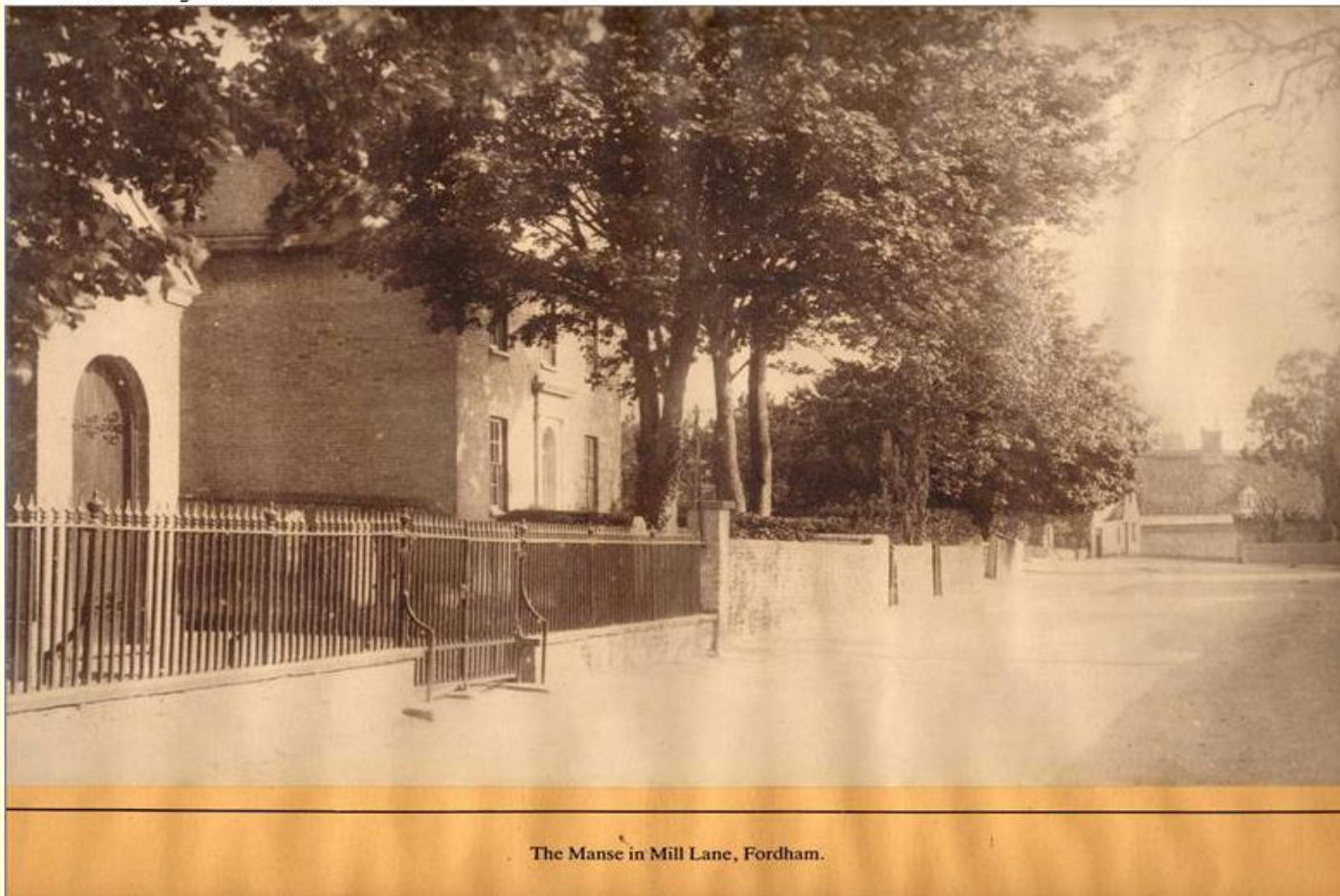
So there went a penny, for what could I do?  
As they don't hold the plate at the door;  
No! they bring it before you, right into the pew;  
But however I'll go there no more

The Wesleyans next Sunday come into my head,  
So I went, for the sake of variety;  
And they were collecting, the Gospel to spread,  
By means of the Bible Society

He spoke of the Heathen on some foreign shore –  
How they lived and they died without hope;  
So a penny went there, and a penny before,  
Enough for a half-pound of soap.







The Manse in Mill Lane, Fordham.

I said, 'They shall draw no more coppers from me;'  
So next Sunday I went to Mill Lane  
'Independents', they call themselves; how can that be,  
When they were begging again?

Well I gave them a penny, and felt fit to fall,  
For the plate but me all in a flutter.  
That made three-pence I'd given for nothing at all –  
The price of a quartern of butter.



I'll go to the church, where my father and mother  
In youth always trained me to go  
Chapel's always collecting for something or other,  
But at church they don't do so I know

The parson, thought I, as I got o'er the stile,  
At New Year may send me a gift;  
You may go to the meeting a precious long while  
Ere they'll give you a blanket or shift

As I entered the church they were singing the psalm,  
And the text was 'Our works will not save us'.  
Then I soon fell asleep, as the weather was warm,  
But a beautiful sermon he gave us





Fordham Parish Church after the Restoration in 1873  
showing an additional window, extension of the  
ramparts, allowing for the organ chamber and the  
Vicar's Vestry off the Chancel.

We moved slowly out and I could not tell why,  
So I whispered, and asked Nancy Morgan  
“A collection”, said she, “a collection?” said I  
“Yes”, said she, “for to buy a new organ”

RUSTIC SONGS  
AND  
WAYSIDE MUSINGS

BY  
JAMES R. WITHERS

FOURTH EDITION  
REVISED AND CORRECTED

LONDON

DARTON & CO. 42 PATERNOSTER ROW

MDCCCLXVII



Then he made a mistake; in 1867 he republished a selection of his best-known poems in a volume entitled 'Rustic Songs and Wayside Musings', many of a religious tenor. It did not sell well, then his publisher closed down and half the number printed were sold unbound as waste paper—.



RUSTIC SONGS  
AND  
WAYSIDE MUSINGS

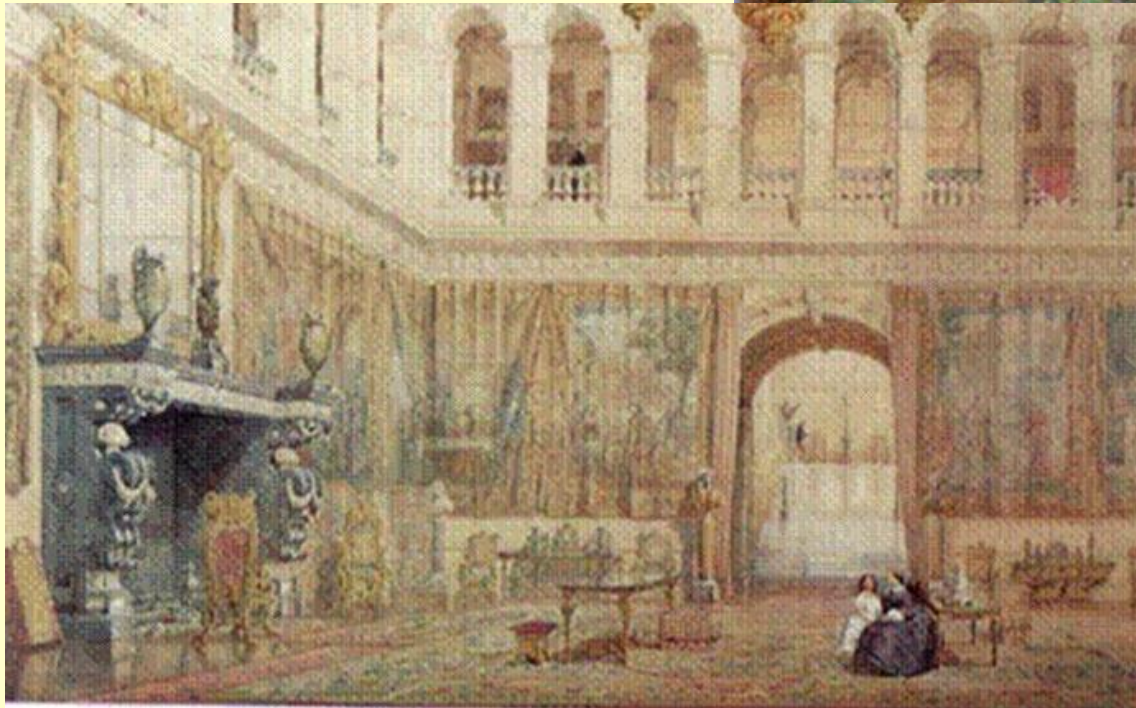
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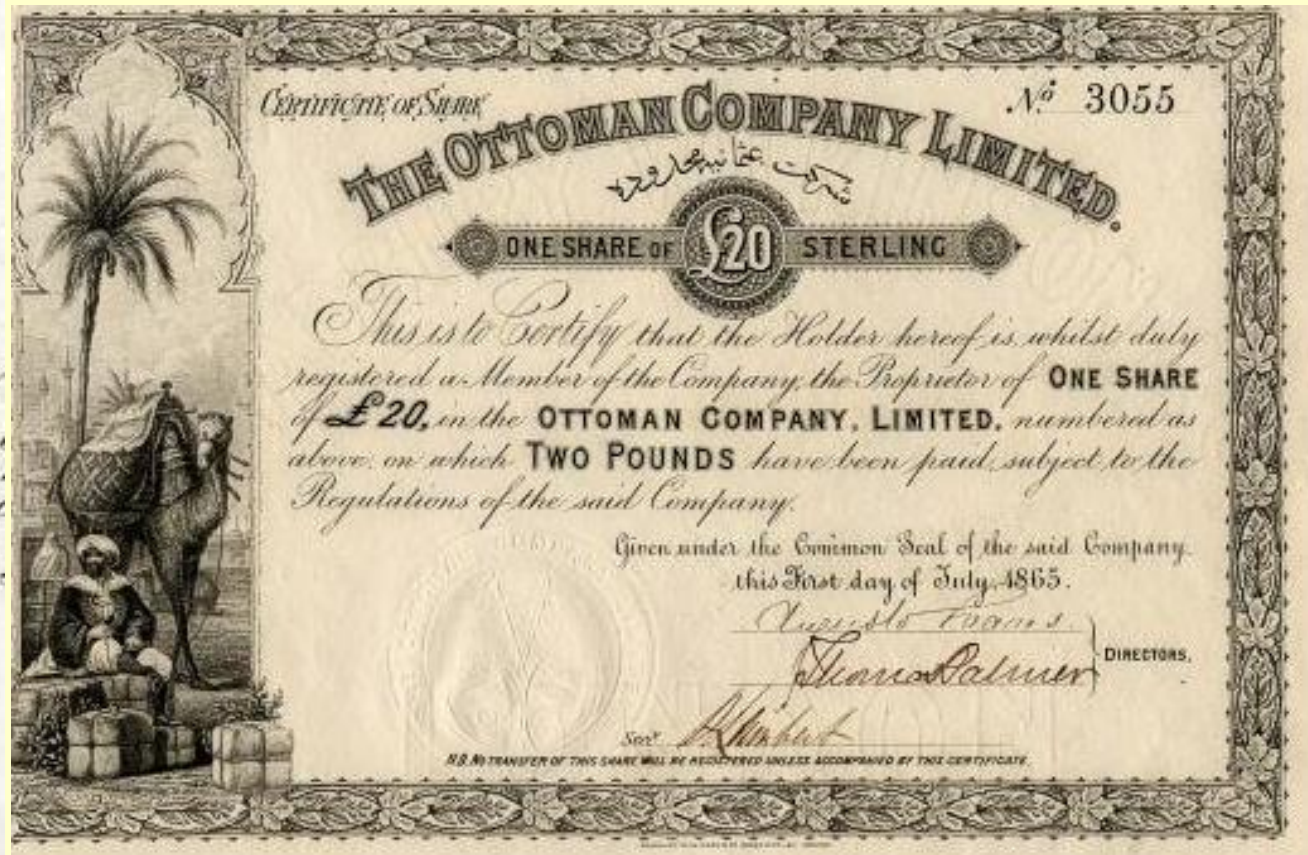






But the loss was defrayed by Baroness Meyer de Rothschild who, with her daughter, was a frequent visitor to his picturesque cottage in Fordham; she gave him a splendid china statuette. His friends wrote to Baron Rothschild and other peers, seeking to get him a pension from the Government, but to no avail.





From the sale of his poems he had earned between four & five hundred pounds. This money was invested in Turkish Bonds, issued to support the Ottoman Empire, Britain's ally in the battle against Russia, and altogether enough money was accumulated to bring him in about £40 or £50 a year.

But the investments went bad - For the last two years I have received no interest for them. I hoped that I had earned enough to keep me out of the Union in my old age, but now there seems but little hope to rely on. He suffered another loss by the death of his daughter in 1876



In December 1877 the Evening Telegraph reported : James Withers ... known to some as the English Burns is once more experiencing the unpoetical forms of life and the last we saw of the poor old man, who is nearly 80, he was driving a donkey cart, selling cabbages at Newmarket –



**AN UNFORTUNATE POET.**  
Withers, the Cambridgeshire poet, known to some as the English Burns, is once more experiencing the unpoetical form of life. Some years ago a subscription list was formed to enable him to publish his poems. The Queen, who took a great interest in him, gave £50 as did also the Duke of Rutland; and altogether enough money was accumulated to bring him in about forty or fifty pounds a year. This money was unfortunately invested in Turkish Bonds, and the last we saw of the poor old man, who is nearly eighty, he was driving a donkey cart, selling cabbages at Newmarket.



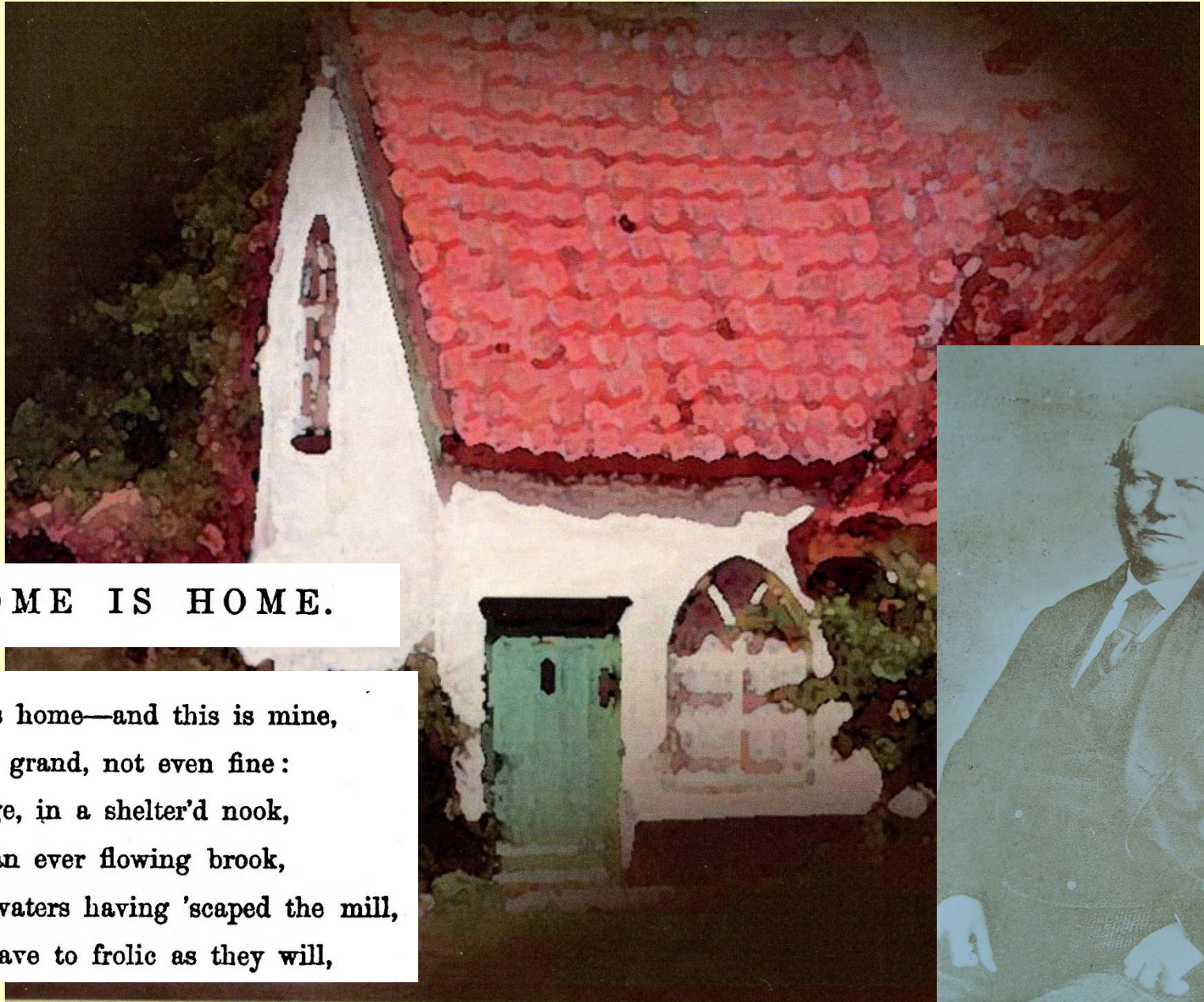


‘He and his invalid wife occupy a cottage, the rent of which is £5, and the ceiling of it so low that the portly figure of the Poet cannot stand upright in it. He retails a few vegetables for a living ... is it creditable that he should be consigned to the Union House in his old age.

His wife died after a long illness in 1885 and most of his literary friends had passed away. However one of his most ardent admirers built him a house near his own in the north of London..



But Withers refused to move, preferring to live a thrifty life in his cottage with his garden and the flowers he loved.



## HOME IS HOME.

Home is home—and this is mine,  
Nothing grand, not even fine :  
A cottage, in a shelter'd nook,  
Beside an ever flowing brook,  
Whose waters having 'scaped the mill,  
Have leave to frolic as they will,







One of his final poems was devoted to the problems of cows eating his blooms –

Pray Madam! Have you noticed that your butter, made of late  
Has a flavour quite peculiar, from what your cows have ate?  
If not, I think you may detect it if you try  
For they always bite my flowers off each time that they go by

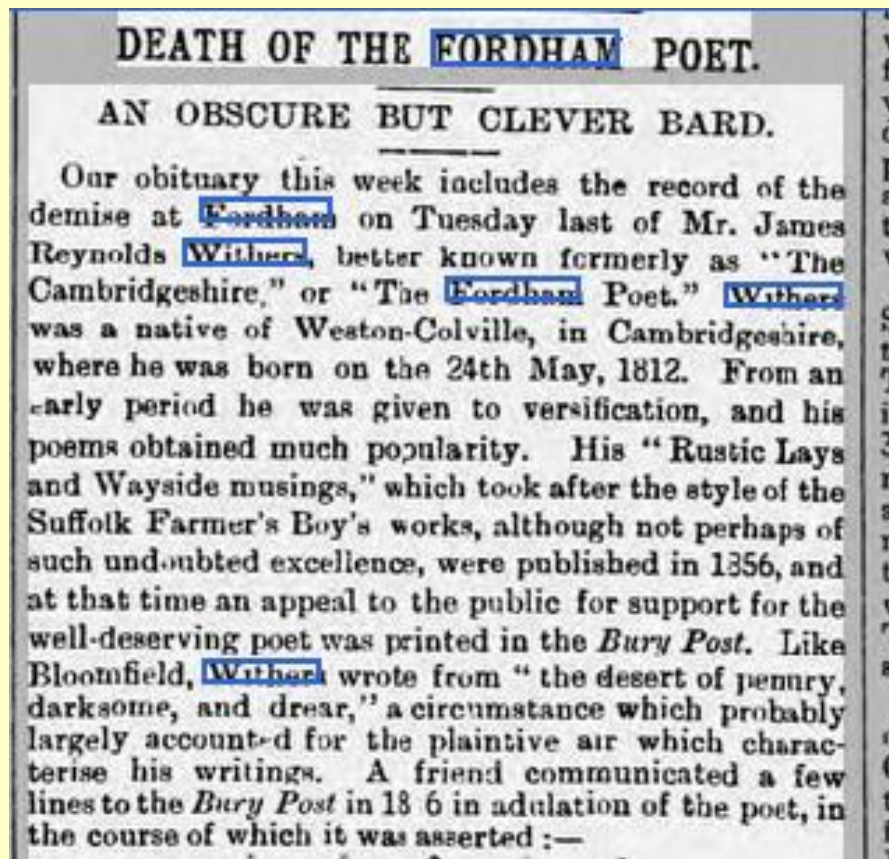


Each morning when the other cows go to the river's brink  
Her eye is on my wall-flowers – she does not care to drink  
And if I am not in the way to make her hasten on  
Her long rough tongue is round the leaves, and quickly they are gone

I think 'tis right that you should know how impudent she is,  
She leers in at my window with sly and roguish quiz;  
“And when I try and frighten her, and stamp and loudly bawl,  
She licks her nose and coughs and stares, and does not mind at all”







In the autumn of 1890 his strength began to fail and he died on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1892, cared for to the end by his grandchildren. He was buried by the side of his daughter in the village churchyard.

At his death he was described by the Bury Post as an Obscure but clever bard. They reprinted a poem to him first published in December 1856. It concluded :

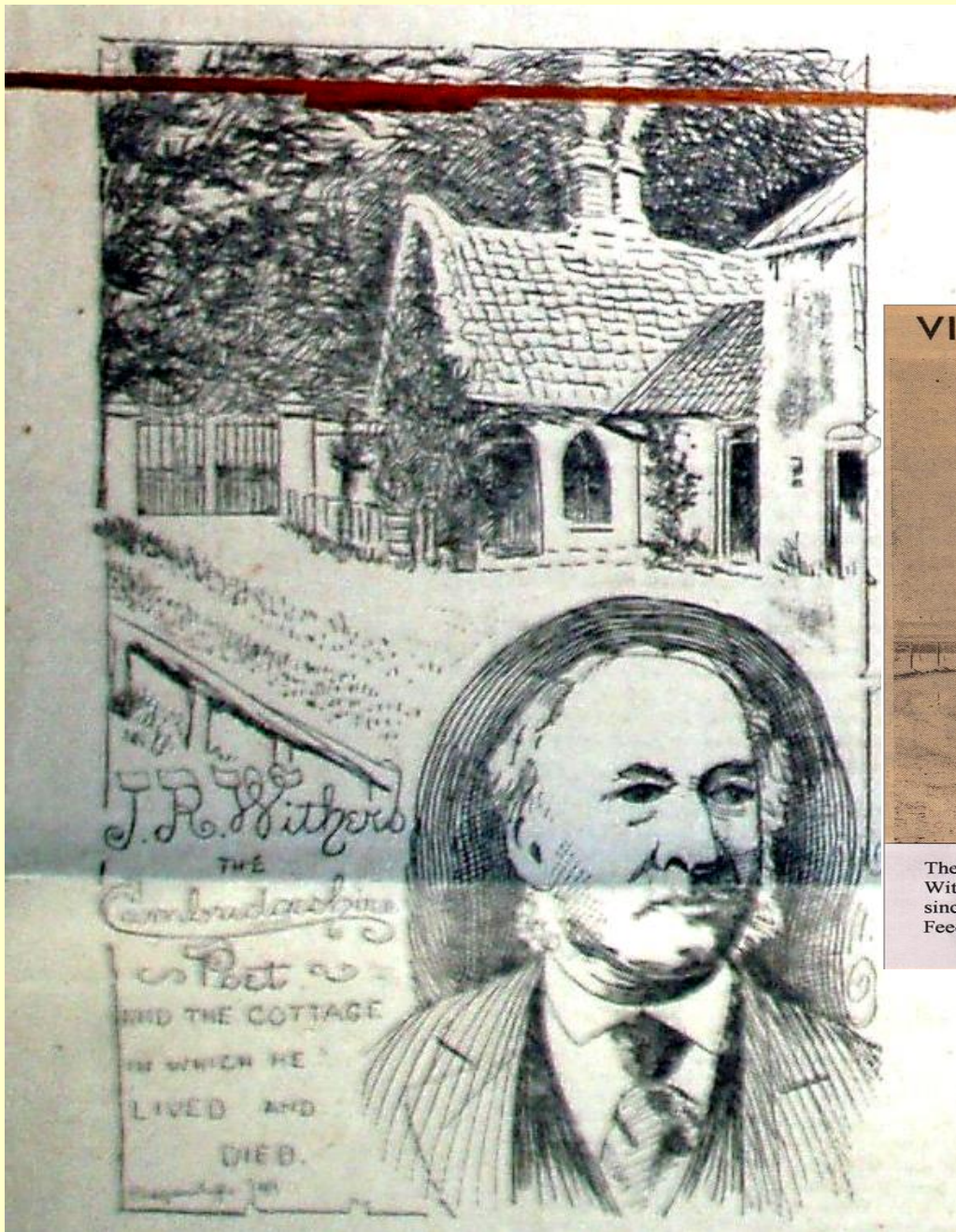
‘Nor let it be said to our country’s disgrace  
Such a Bard in obscurity finished his race’

But that is what happened.



But he was not forgotten in Fordham. In 1898 a stone monument was erected over the grave by public subscription following a campaign by Janet Aspland of Croydon/Wcken with a stained glass window in the church. His name is remembered in a Memorial Hall and in street names





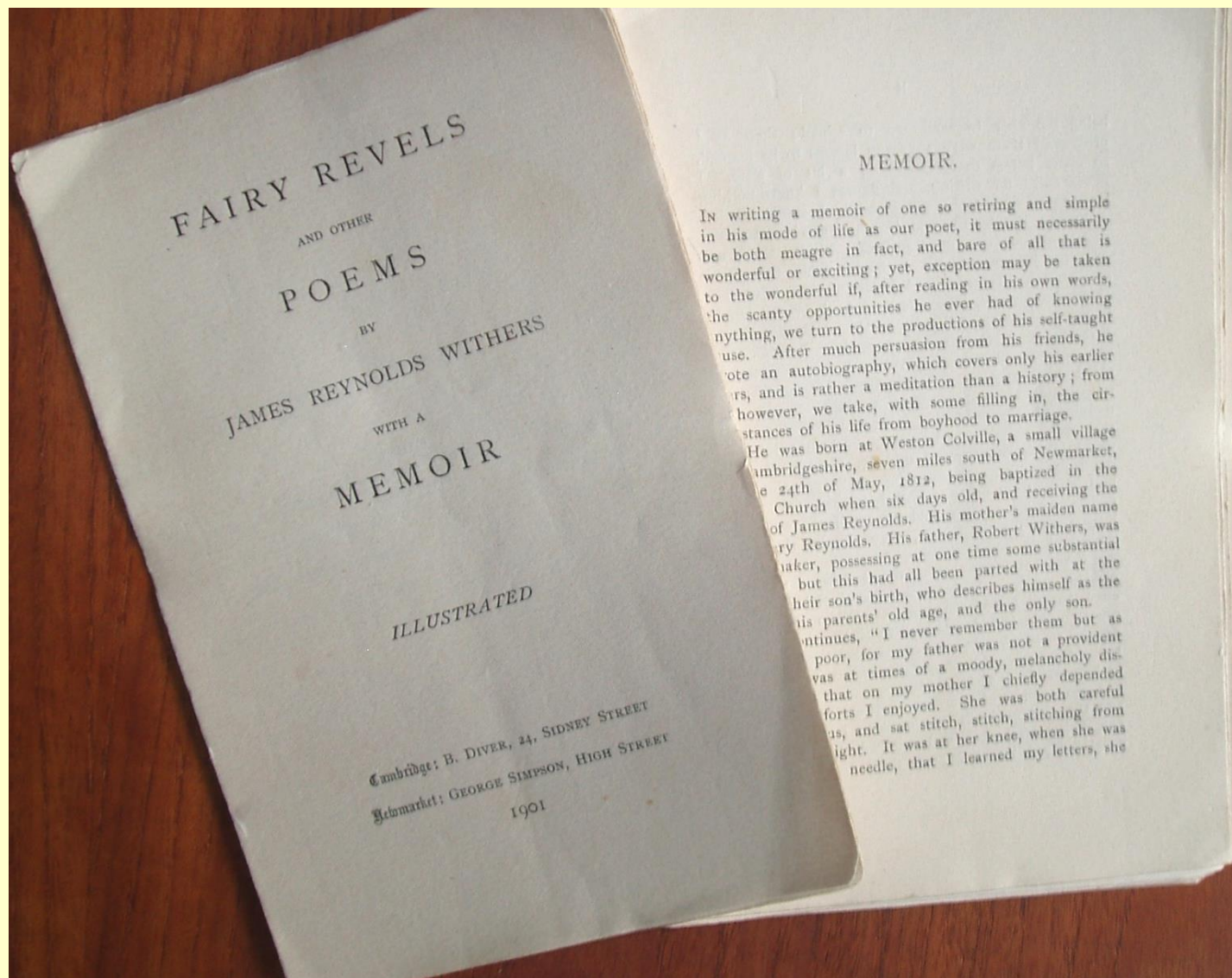
## VILLAGE'S FAMOUS POET LIVED HERE



The tiny cottage of the poet James Withers still stands in Fordham today. Withers lived in the cottage for more than fifty years until his death 1892 and it has since remained in the family. The poet's great grandson, Mr George Bowen, is pictured feeding the ducks outside the cottage with two-year-old Gillian Page, a great-great granddaughter of Withers.

A reporter from the Cambridgeshire Weekly Gazette 31 Mar 1893 visited cottage and other reporters have told the tale at various times since





It was not the end

Janet Aspland of Wicken, whose mother. The Miss Haylock of Balsham, had had a volume of poems dedicated to her collected the various manuscripts together and published them as Fairy Revels in 1901






Copies were distributed to libraries across the country

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# POEMS

## UPON VARIOUS SUBJECTS.

BY J. R. WITHERS,  
FORDHAM, CAMBRIDGESHIRE.

THIRD EDITION.  
REVISED AND CORRECTED.

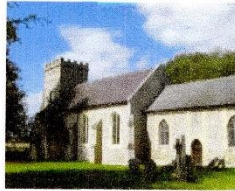
London:  
SIMPKIN, MARSHALL & CO.  
MANCHESTER: JOHN HEYWOOD, 143, DEANSGATE.  
1864.





His works have been put to music and an exhibition devoted to his poetry has been displayed in Fordham church

# ST MARY'S WESTON COLVILLE



## THE ORDER FOR EVENING PRAYER

**02 September 2012**

**In celebration of  
James Reynolds Withers 1812 – 1892**

**"The Cambridge Poet"**

**St Mary, Weston Colville, Cambridgeshire**

*The footpaths leading through the fields and grove,  
Where once a careless boy I loved to rove  
Are overturned by the encroaching plough;  
And I should trespass if I walked there now.*



And now farewell, ye scenes of early days ;  
Once more I've traced your fields and winding ways,  
And though I see such changes as I go,  
They're called improvements and they may be so,  
Yet every stile and tree and hedge-row wild,  
So dear to me, when I was but a child,  
Long pass'd away forgot by other men,  
I want to see them as I saw them then.

But changes come to all—are come to me,  
I am not now what once I used to be ;  
Still the same feelings in my heart do dwell.  
Home of my happy childhood, fare thee well !

His first published poem had recalled his childhood days and regretted the changes

And now farewell, ye scenes of early days'  
Once more I've traced your fields and winding ways,  
And though I see such changes as I go,  
They're called improvements and they may be so.

But changes come to all – are come to me,  
I am not now what once I used to be;  
Still the same feelings in my heart do dwell.  
Home of my happy childhood, fare they well

But this had been written when he was a comparatively young man – it was published in 1856, over 35 years before his death.



But this had been written when he was a comparatively young man – it was published in 1856, over 35 years before his death. As with much of his work, it is not what it seems







# Saving the work of the English Burns

A Cambridgeshire poet once dubbed the English Burns will have his original manuscripts saved for future generations by Cambridge University.

The university will add the original manuscripts of James Withers (1812-1892) to its collection where they can be appreciated by scholars, including those of the John Clare Centre at the university faculty of English, once the paperwork is complete.

Mention his name outside of his home village of Fordham and you will almost certainly get a blank look in return, but now there is a growing movement to ensure his work is recognised alongside some of the country's literary luminaries.

While, in the main, Withers remains one of our greatest unknown poets, his work received accolades from royalty - he was given a £50 grant from Queen Victoria, and mentioned in the same ilk as Charles Dickens, William Wordsworth and George Byron.

Not bad for a man who was once so poor he ended up in a workhouse before his poems became successful. But then, in an ironic twist of fate, Withers lost it all by investing in Turkish bonds in support of the Ottoman Empire and was reduced to selling cabbages and driving a donkey cart before his death in January 1892.

Cambridge historian Mike Petty said: "He is certainly in the same league as John Clare, the Northamptonshire poet who is much revered. Yet Withers died in obscurity."

"There is, however, a memorial window to him in Fordham church that was erected by his supporters and there is currently a display there."

Withers' family is determined to ensure his work survives and met with a librarian from the university this week to discuss the possibility of adding the manuscripts to their collection.

Mr Petty added: "Withers' actual poems have been preserved by his family. Now they feel it is time to do something to ensure they are further preserved. Ren Bowen, who has looked after the scraps of paper on which the verses were penned, is now in his 90s and realises that they are historically significant and should be saved for future generations."

Withers was born in Wyton Colville but settled in Fordham in 1824. After a Fordham resident, Mrs R D Fyson, read some of his poems she helped to produce his first book, published in 1854.

Second and third volumes followed in 1856 and 1861 and his financial fortunes were boosted considerably as a result.

An Aberdonian, W Cunningham, also drew attention to his work and after revealing that the poet was living in a humble cottage in Fordham and mending shoes, cash arrived in the guise of a £30 grant from Queen Victoria (about £4,200 today), another £50 came from the Duke of Rutland and £10 was donated from a literary fund.

Drush Maria Mulock, wife of a publisher at Macmillans who also had a shop in Cambridge, championed his prose, dubbing him the 'Cambridgeshire hedgerow poet'. As a result, his third volume won plaudits from Dickens and Martin Tupper.

Free of poverty for the first time in his life, everything seemed to be going well until he made the mistake of investing in the Ottoman Empire in 1867. He invested between £100-£500 in Turkish bonds, but the investment went bad and allied to the loss of his daughter, who died in 1876, Withers suffered a double blow. In 1877, and nearly 80, he was spotted selling cabbages and driving a donkey cart. He was cared for by his grandchildren until, after a period of ill health, he died in January 1892.

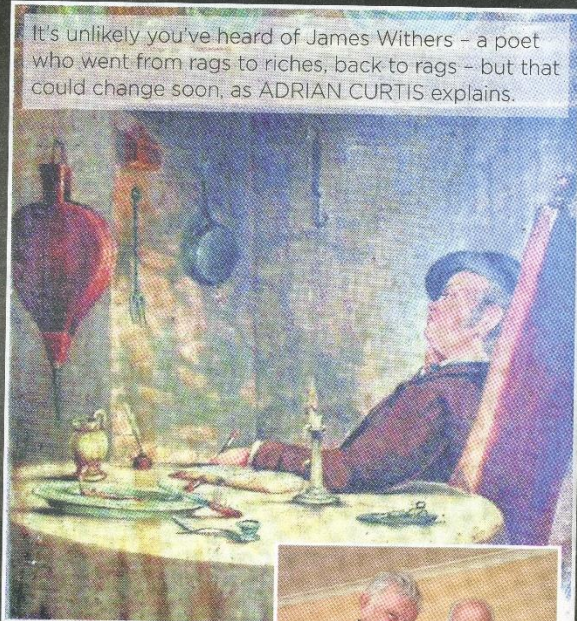
Six years after his death, the people of Fordham produced a monument in his honour and the church has a stained glass window paying tribute to the 'unknown' Hedgerow poet, who was dubbed the 'English Burns'.

Above right, James Withers painted circa 1855 in his cottage

Fair right, historian Mike Petty and Ren Bowen pictured with some of James Withers' original work. Picture: Richard Marsham

Right, the poet captured in a photograph

Below, the window in Fordham that was created in the poet's memory



In remembrance of James Reynolds Withers Rural Poet born 1812 died 1892. This window is placed in recognition of his genius and sympathy with his life of humble aspiration

In August 2019 Reynolds Withers Bowen presented them to Cambridge University Library where the work of the now *unforgotten* Fordham poet will be forever available to scholars



These notes were compiled as part of a Powerpoint Presentation by Mike Petty.  
Please make what use of them you may. Kindly remember where they came from –  
[www.mikepetty.org.uk](http://www.mikepetty.org.uk).

13 August 2019

