

## **A Life of John Dinham (1788-1864) by Sir Harold Papworth**

JOHN DINHAM, the great Philanthropist of Exeter, was born at Kenton on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1788. His father, Thomas Dinham, was a Farm Bailiff or Steward at Powderham Castle, and his mother, Sarah, kept a small shop in Kenton.

John's education was in a private school at Chudleigh run by a Mr Bond. He left school at the age of fourteen and found work in Exeter where he was apprenticed to Mr Tucker, a grocer in High Street. It is on record that his father firmly believed in withdrawing children from school at an early age, so that they could enter their careers at the bottom rung of the ladder. Only in this way, he held, would they acquire a thorough knowledge of their chosen business in all its branches.

John Dinham's father was a man of deep piety and the mantle of his piety fell fully upon the son. According to our present standards his outlook was perhaps very narrow. He enjoined his son to find not more than one or two friends in Exeter, prove their worth and remain faithful to them, avoiding the other allurements of the city.

Faithfully following his father's advice, John chose as his friends the two sons of Alderman Reuben Phillips, who had a Chemist shop in Fore Street which achieved great notoriety as the first shop in Exeter to be lit by Gas. This startling innovation was at first regarded with suspicion by many, as all innovations are, but it brought the Phillips family into prominence; and when a little later the first 'Gas Light Company' was founded, the family acquired a prominent part in its first management.

After serving his apprenticeship with Mr Tucker, John Dinham started business on his own in 1809 as a Jeweller and Silversmith at 84 Fore Street. A little later he got into financial difficulties with jewellery and opened a new Wing in his shop for the sale of groceries and tea. At this time, of course, it could not have been foreseen, but it was Tea which was to bring Dinham his fortune.

Shortly before setting up business on his own, John married Martha Ford at St Stephen's Church on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1808. The marriage was not a happy one.

Dinham was a hard and conscientious worker and, as was the general custom in those days, acted as his own commercial traveller, going from place to place with specimens of jewellery. The failure of his jewellery business was not due to neglect on his part, unless it be an unwillingness to press his debtors, but to a couple of fortuitous circumstances, namely, the sale of jewellery and silverware from door to door by itinerant continentals, and fierce competition from German silver.

It is on record that some of these wandering salesmen bought goods from Dinham's shop in Exeter, and after making enough money returned to their homes on the Continent without paying their accounts. The result was Dinham's bankruptcy and the closure of his business.

Deeply hurt and embarrassed by this undeserved insolvency, but undaunted in spirit, Dinham began again at the bottom and found work as a Clerk in Messrs Kingdon's paper business in Fore Street.

From this ordinary clerkship Dinham by a stroke of good fortune moved back into Tea. A London Tea Company, having decided in about 1827 to open a branch in Exeter, appointed John Dinham as its Manager; and this was the bottom rung of a new ladder leading to wealth and prosperity.

After a few years the London Tea Company closed its branch in Exeter and John Dinham, joined by a few wealthy friends who had confidence in him, started a new firm and became its Managing Director. This venture proved a great success and Dinham was soon able to pay in full and with interest all the creditors under his bankruptcy.

His first wife having died in 1823, he married Susannah Foster in 1831. Unlike his first marriage, this was an exceedingly happy one and lasted for over twenty-seven years until Susannah's death in 1859.

This is an appropriate place to record that John Dinham was a deeply religious man. He was a member of the Church of England with a devout evangelical outlook and a regular worshipper at Bedford Chapel (destroyed in Exeter's post-War redevelopment of Bedford Street). When good fortune befell him, he became a generous benefactor of many church societies, especially the Church Pastoral Aid Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Church Missionary Society and the Religious Tract Society. He was an assiduous distributor of religious Tracts and was in the habit of inserting them in Tea caskets despatched to his customers. He was a pioneer in founding Sunday School, the first of which he established in Mary Arches Lane.

Being now a rich man John Dinham was able to realise his cherished ambition to help others and become a benefactor and philanthropist. He built an Infant School in Preston Street; was largely instrumental in beginning the Exeter branch of the YMCA; and was a liberal benefactor of charitable institutions for the deaf, dumb and blind and other homes of refuge for persons in need.

To these may be added innumerable private and personal acts of generosity, but the most outstanding benefaction and the one by which he is most thankfully remembered is the foundation of the Exeter Free Cottages.

Mount Dinham, as it is now called, was once a large field known as Turners Garden and divided into garden allotments. When these proved unremunerative, it was proposed to sell the site for various kinds of public amusements like fairs, circuses and other travelling shows. This did not appeal to Dinham's puritan mind, and so, enlisting the help of others, he bought the land and, being a trustee of the Exeter Episcopal Charity Schools, he gave a piece of it for the building of a new school. The name of the land was then changed from Turners Garden to 'The Charity Land'.

Then came the first four blocks of sixteen cottages which Dinham built at his own expense, the architect being George Cumming the City Surveyor. The next two blocks of four were built by some of his friends as a 'testimonial' to his philanthropy. The next eight houses were given by John Soames of St Thomas, and the last eight by Dinham, making a total of forty. He also gave the site on which, through the benevolence of William Gibbs of Tynesfield, the magnificent church of St Michael & All Angels was built in 1868.

The houses on Mount Dinham are now assigned to their residents by the Dinham Trustees, though during his lifetime Dinham held the right of nomination to three large and three small houses.

This great philanthropist died at Dawlish on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1864 at the age of 74, having bequeathed his fortune to be divided between fifty to sixty charities, including the four Church Societies of which he had been a life-long supporter.

John Dinham was buried on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1864 in Bartholomew Street Cemetery by the Reverend R Lovatt of Bedford Chapel. He was interred in a vault in which his wife, Susannah, (after being happily married to him for over twenty-seven years,) had been buried five years before. A statue in white marble was erected to his memory in Northernhay Gardens in 1866. It was sculpted by E B Stephens ARA of London and bears the inscription "Erected by the Citizens of Exeter and others in memory of his piety, integrity and charity 1866".

Re-typed and slightly edited by Richard Barnes, June 2014, from an article written in the 1960s by Rev Sir Harold Papworth, Assistant Priest at St Michael's, Mount Dinham.