Spalding Gentlemen's Society

By G. W. BAILEY, F.R.S.A.

REPRINTED FROM "THE LINCOLNSHIRE MAGAZINE"

Spalding Gentlemen's Society

By G. W. BAILEY, F.R.S.A.

REPRINTED FROM "THE LINCOLNSHIRE MAGAZINE"

SPALDING GENTLEMEN'S SOCIETY

BY G. W. BAILEY, F.R.S.A.,
Honorary Curator and Secretary.

THE pleasant market town of Spalding in the Holland Division of Lincolnshire, has a claim to distinction in being the home of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society, one of the oldest learned societies in the kingdom, a society, that after two and a quarter centuries of continuous existence, like Tennyson's "Brook," still goes on with unabated energy.

The Society had its origin during the revival of interest in antiquarian research which sprang up in the early days of the eighteenth century. One may say revival because in the days of Queen Elizabeth, certain learned persons, who were impressed by the obvious importance of preserving the vast numbers of records which had been scattered abroad by the pillage of the monasteries, gathered together at the house of Sir Robert Cotton under the patronage of Archbishop Parker to discuss ways and means for preserving such records.

This society which included among other well known personages, Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Philip Sidney, Lord Burleigh, John Stowe and William Camden, existed for about thirty years.

It dissolved during the reign of James I who did not look upon such societies with much favour. The flickering flame was kept alight however by a few men of great eminence such as Dugdale, Selden, Ashmole and others and so we arrive at the early years of the eighteenth century when Maurice Johnson, the founder of the Spalding Society, then a young barrister, with an ardent love for antiquarian research, literature, and other polite arts drifted into the congenial company to be found amongst the frequenters of the coffee houses in the vicinity of the Temple. He appears to have formed a friendship with John Gay, the poet, who introduced him to other literary celebrities notably Addison, Pope and Steele.

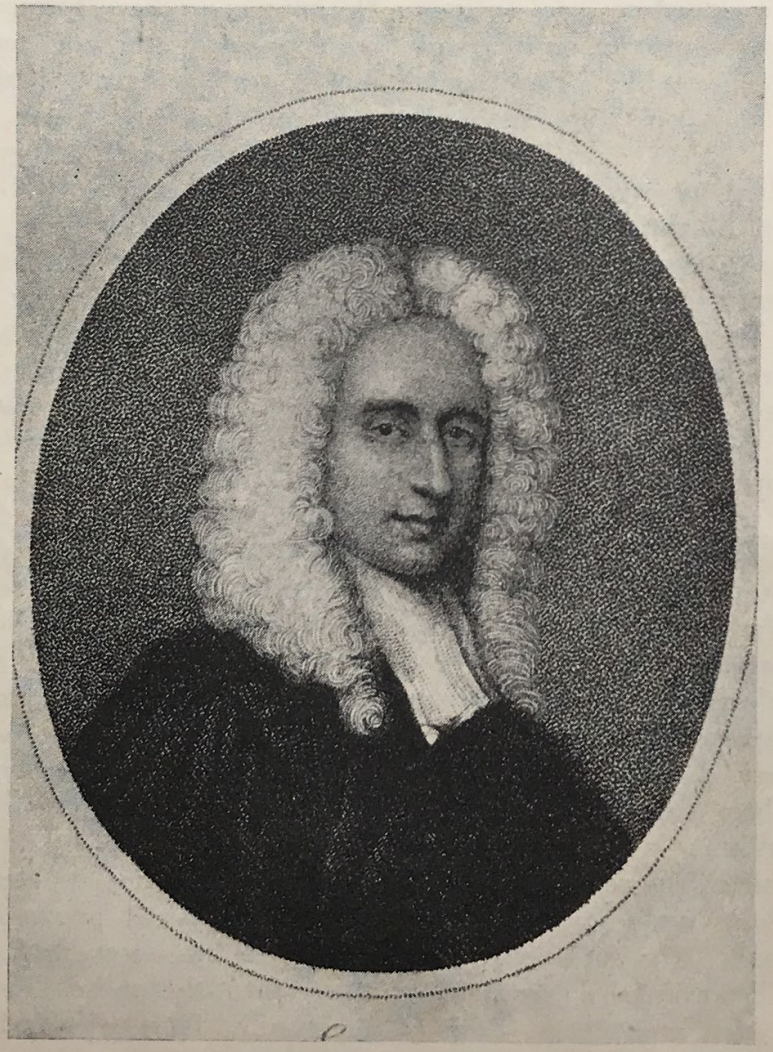
His love for archaeology also brought him into the circle of Browne Willis, Roger and Samuel Gale, Stukeley and Rhymer, who were seriously considering the founding of a society of antiquaries and it was agreed that Maurice Johnson should be their librarian. Meanwhile, in 1709, Johnson had returned to his native town, perhaps rather regretfully, for the little market town of Spalding must have seemed somewhat dull after the intellectual life of a great city. His love of learning however was so great that he determined to make the bold experiment of establishing a literary society in the heart of the Lincolnshire Fens. In this he was encouraged by Secretary Addison, Captain Steele and others of Button's Club, one of his favourite haunts in London.

Taking care not to alarm the country gentlemen by any premature mention of antiquities he endeavoured at first to allure them into the more flowery paths of literature. They began in 1709 by meeting at Younger's Coffee House in the Abbey Yard, Spalding, and there waiting for the London coach to bring in the latest copy of *The Tatler*, then a new periodical

paper, which was immediately read aloud to the whole company and the article discussed. "This insensibly drew the men of sense and letters into a sociable way of conversing." The Society still has in its possession copies of *The Tatler* printed on a single sheet and dating from 1709.

In this way the foundations of the Society were laid.

Maurice Johnson (born 1688) was a man of considerable influence, a member of the Inner Temple and steward of the manor of Spalding for the Duke of Buccleuch and those of Kirton and Croyland for the Earl of Exeter and that of Hitchin for his kinsman, James Bogdani, Esq. He was a Justice of the Peace for the Parts of Holland and connected with the Wingfields of Tickencote, the Lynns of Southwick, Sir Matthew Gamlyn, Sir John Oldfield, and other families of note. Early in life he married a daughter of Joshua Ambler of Spalding. She was the



MAURICE JOHNSON, F.S.A.,
Founder of Spalding Gentlemen's Society, 1688—1755.

Photograph by Dr. J. R. Munro, from the Holl-Vertue engraving.

grand-daughter of Sir Anthony Oldfield and lineally descended from Sir Thomas Gresham, the founder of the Gresham College and of the Royal Exchange, London. A keen collector of coins, enamels, seals, armour and other antiquities and possessing a fine library containing some of the manuscripts and cartularies of the mitred Priory of Spalding which he had inherited from his great grandfather, Sir Richard Ogle, he was always able to provide something of interest to be discussed at the meetings.

Rules were drawn up, officers were appointed and minutes were carefully kept of all meetings, at first on separate sheets of paper which were later bound up in book form. The first of these vellum bound volumes begins in 1710 and ends in 1729. The motto which appears on its title page, is taken from Ecclesiasticus XXV, 3, and reads—"If thou hast gathered nothing in thy youth, how canst thou find anything in thine age." Volume II is dedicated to its member, Sir Isaac Newton, F.R.S., Master of the Mint, with the words "Surely there is a vein for the silver" from Job XXVIII, 1.

The minute books, of which there is a complete series up-to-date, are among the Society's treasured possessions. The early volumes are mostly in Johnson's own handwriting and are delightfully illustrated with small drawings in wash, line or colour of objects exhibited at the meetings, executed either by himself or his daughter, Ann Alethea.

After Maurice Johnson's death in 1755, there is a falling off in the regularity with which the minutes are kept but here the old account books preserve the continuity. These are second only in interest to the minute books and cover the period 1718-1815. The society's meetings in those days were lengthy, often lasting from 4 p.m. until 10 p.m. and so some form of refreshment became necessary. Here are a few entries selected at random:- October 29th, 1718, wine £1 2s. 0d.; ale 4d.; tobacco, 6d.; candles, 5/6. In January, 1720, tea appears and in July of the same year cyder, to be followed in December, 1726, by Chocolatt. In 1734, we find Mr. "Operator" Cox purchasing Rasons for making wine and later malt and hops for brewing beer. The early curators of the society were termed operators. In 1734, Oyle for the lamp makes its appearance, as does the purchase of a glass case for the head of a Condor Eagle. In 1735, an Air Pump was purchased. Pipe burning is a frequent item. In 1805 there is a resolution that "the apparatus be immediately put into complete repair." The Society had at this time a collection of electrical apparatus but this, like the Physic Garden and the Materia Medica collection no longer exists. On January 1st, 1814, we find a law made "that all the Books, Maps, Prints, Papers, Medals, Curiosities, Furniture, etc., already in the possession of the Society or which may hereafter be purchased by or be bequeathed to them shall be considered the joint property of all the existing members."

A regular interchange of minutes took place between the Society and the Society of Antiquaries, London, and it is a pleasure to note that the latter still keeps in touch with the Spalding Society.

To return, however, in 1711 *The Spectator*" came out and was duly read, and after this *The Lay Monk, The Freethinker, The Censor, The Lover*, etc., etc. Copies of all these papers remain in the Society's possession.

By this time, owing to the activity of its secretary, the Society was flourishing greatly and in its list of regular and honorary members we find the names of the most

learned men of the day—Sir Isaac Newton, F.R.S., Sir Hans Sloane, P.R.S., Edward Harley (Earl of Oxford), Roger Gale, F.R.S., (Vice-President Society of Antiquaries,) Samuel Gale, Dr. Stukeley, F.R.S., the poets Gay and Pope, the painters George Vertue and Richard Collins, Beaupre Bell, Dr. Jurin, Martin Folkes, P.R.S., Browne Willis, Joseph Banks, Samuel Wesley, M.A., Samuel Wesley, jnr., M.A., Dr. Richard Bentley, D.D., F.R.S., (Master of Trinity and formerly a master of Spalding Grammar School,) William Bogdani, F.S.A., Samuel Buck (the engraver), Lord Coleraine(President, Society of Antiquaries), Dr. Richard Mead (Vice-President, Society of Antiquaries), Emanuel Mendez da Costa, F.R.S., F.S.A., Dositheos Archimandrite of the Monastery of Pantokrator who, in 1733, travelling with his chaplain and secretary, was present at a meeting of the Society and at his own request written by himself in Greek in the minute books, was admitted an honorary member. He exhibited some interesting carvings, in box wood, of sacred subjects to the Society. Captain John Perry (engineer to the Czar, Peter the Great) who was about that time engaged in drainage of Deeping Fen, John Grundy, engineer, whose illustrated plan of Spalding may be seen in the museum. Francis,

Spalding Gentlemen's Society.

Minute Book No. 1, April 6th, 1727, showing Arms of Spalding Priory.

Photograph by late Mr. E. M. M. Smith.

Duke of Buccleuch and Sir John Evelyn, Bart (Vice-President of Society of Antiquaries.)

Later still, long after the founder's death, we find as members, Sir G. Gilbert Scott, Alfred Lord Tennyson (Poet Laureate,) Hallam Lord Tennyson, Sir George Scharf, C.B., F.S.A., Viscount Oxenbridge, Lord Dillon (President of the Society of Antiquaries), Lord Peckover, Sir A. Woolaston Franks, K.C.B., F.R.S., (President, Society of Antiquaries,) Sir Walter Besant, Sir Geo. Mivart, F.R.S., Sir Henry Howorth, Earl Curzon and many others of great eminence. It is interesting to note that one of the present members, Mr. Wilfred A. Marsden, Keeper of Printed Books in the British Museum, is a direct descendant of the founder, Maurice Johnson. Many interesting letters from celebrities to Maurice Johnson are in the possession of the Society stored in the strong room, which, by the way, is one of the places approved by the Master of the Rolls for the deposit of Manorial Records. Among these letters are quite a number from Dr. William Stukeley, F.R.S., the celebrated antiquary, who was a very active member of the Society. Born at Holbeach in 1687, Stukeley first graduated in medicine and for some time was in practice at Boston and Grantham. Later in 1729, he entered the church and in 1730 became vicar of All Saints', Stamford, afterwards removing to London where he died in 1765. His communications deal with various subjects and are usually illustrated with his own line and wash drawings. Of particular interest in this respect are the papers on the figure carvings which adorn the west front of Croyland Abbey and those dealing with Stonehenge. Other papers describe the earthquake felt in London in 1749 and there is one on the cause of earthquake which Stukeley attributes to electrical vibrations. He frequently communicated to Johnson what he could remember of the papers read before the Royal Society. His "Itinerarium Curiosum" is dedicated to Maurice Johnson.

Another friend of Johnson was the Rev. Samuel Wesley, M.A., Rector of Epworth. Both gentlemen were blessed with large families, Johnson having twenty-six children and Wesley nineteen. The unique design for the frontispiece of Wesley's, magnum opus "Dessertations on the Book of Job" the compiling of which had occupied twenty-five years of his leisure, was suggested by Maurice Johnson. The engraving shows Job sitting at the gate of his city dispensing justice. Under it, on the Society's copy, Johnson has written "This is the author's own picture in the Habit and Character of his hero and very like him who was not unlike Job in his manners and many circumstances."

Wesley was elected a member of the Society in 1723 and, as a member, presented to it a copy of this rare work which may be seen in the library.

Maurice Johnson was only occasionally president of the Society but he acted as secretary for thirty-five years.

In order to gratify the tastes of all parties it was agreed that the anniversary meeting of the Society held on the last Thursday in August, in each year, should be celebrated by a dinner but the secretary (Maurice Johnson) has recorded his complaint that this dinner proved, "an idle and expensive mode of helping the Society, feeding the body rather than the mind." A concert was also given on these occasions

to which the ladies were invited. Special odes were written for the event. One of these, composed by Johnson, beginning "To love and social joys" was sung in 1730. Musgrave Heighington, Doctor of Music and a member of the Society, took an active part in arranging these concerts which lasted from 1730-1747 when they were abandoned for want of resident performers. Maurice Johnson suggested to his friend, George Vertue, the famous engraver, a suitable device for the Society's Book Plate, and the latter executed a fine mezzotint plate of the Birth of Venus, showing the goddess supported by two Tritons, symbolical of the reclamation of the Fenland from the sea. Between the Tritons is a shield bearing the arms of the Society, adapted from the arms of the Earls of Chester and Lincoln, which were also the arms of Spalding Priory. Azure, three garbs or, two above one, an estoile argent for difference. The motto is "Vicinas Urbes Alit" and underneath is the date of institution, MDCCX. It became the custom for members to present a book to the library or some specimen to the museum. In this way the foundations of the present collection were laid, the museum being, with the exception of the Ashmolean, the oldest in the kingdom. A number of the books still survive, many being of the greatest interest as specimens from the old presses of Caxton, Koburgher, Kesler, Plantin, Aldus, etc. Some of the early museum specimens have vanished, for in the course of centuries the Society had many homes in various parts of the town before it built its present house. It still has among other things, a rare specimen of Jas Christopher le Blon's tapestry "A head of Christ," presented by Sir Richard Manningham in 1732, also a fine astrolabe of 16th century Flemish workmanship given to it in 1729 by Mr. Gilby, Recorder of Lincoln, and the map of Spalding executed for the Society by John Grundy, a member, in 1732. The 16th century "Lovell" memorial brass was purchased at about this period. There is also a pewter inkstand engraved with the Society's name and the date 1758. The beautiful 13th century illuminated manuscript Bible presented to the Society by Collins, the miniature painter, an early member, is greatly prized. In 1735 four great portfolios were filled with a collection of Prints, Drawings and Plans, these are still carefully preserved.

There was naturally a slump in the Society's activities after Maurice Johnson's death. Later, under the presidencies of Dr. Moore, Dr. Cammack and Canon Edward Moore, it showed considerable vitality and many interesting papers were read, generally on local archaeology. When Dr. Martin Perry was elected president in 1889, it entered once more into a period of activity and gifts began to flow in to the museum and library. Since this time there has been no looking back. Mr. Stanley Maples proved an energetic and generous president and he was followed by Mr. Fitzalan Howard who filled the office with dignity. On the death of Mr. Howard, Mr. Ashley K. Maples was unanimously elected to the presidential chair.

The Society entered upon a new lease of life in October, 1911, when its new home in Broad Street was opened by Sir Henry Howorth, K.C.I.E., D.C.L., F.R.S., F.S.A. The erection of this fine brick building in Tudor style with Ketton freestone dressings was rendered possible by the generosity of certain well known members and a special bi-centenary appeal. It consisted then of lobby, entrance hall, museum and staircase with large lecture hall and library above, capable of seating

about 130 persons and occupying the whole second floor, with caretaker's house adjoining. The carved panels on the exterior were left over for a time owing to lack of funds. In 1914, however, it came to the knowledge of the officers of the Society, that among the Belgian refugees in the neighbourhood was a highly skilled carver in stone, Jules Tuerlinckx, of Malines, who was at once commissioned to carry out the carving of the nine panels on the front from designs made by the late Mr. E. M. M. Smith, the Society's Honorary Operator (Curator). These panels consist of the arms of the founder over the library window, above the entrance door a very elaborate carving based on the Society's book plate described earlier showing Venus supported by two Tritons, with shield and riband bearing the Society's motto, the whole surrounded by exquisite diaper carving. On either side of this are two small panels bearing the monograms "S.G.S." The three remaining panels bear the words

Photograph by Dr. J. R. Munro.

Spalding Gentlemen's Society.
Bi-Centenary Building opened October, 1911.

Art, Literature, Science, indicative of the objects for which the Society was founded. The head carved in the roundel over the front door is that of Mr. Edward Gentle, a member who contributed largely toward the cost of the building.

A further considerable addition to the Society's premises was made in 1925, when Mr. Ashley K. Maples, in order to commemorate his 26th year as honorary secretary, added a fine strong room with library above, and a store chamber at the side of the building. Mr. Maples also had a limited number of medals struck in silver and bronze to commemorate the bi-centenary of the Society. These were designed by Mr. G. W. Bailey, the honorary curator, and show on the obverse the Society's building with the arms and initials of Maurice Johnson and the dates 1710-1910. On the reverse a device based on the Society's book-plate with the motto "Vicinas Urbes Alit."

The benefactions of Mr. Maples to the Society are too numerous to mention here. They include a vast number of books to the library and many objects of great interest to the museum, *e.g.*, a fine collection of tradesmen's tokens of the 17th and 18th centuries; the Wrest Park Cartulary of Croyland Abbey, written in the reigns of Edward III, Richard II and Henry IV, and the Charter of Deafforestation of lands in Spalding and Pinchbeck, a beautifully illuminated piece of work of the time of Henry IV, dated October 15th, 1399.

In 1926, the Society received a bequest from one of its members, Mr. Everard Green, F.S.A., Rouge Dragon and Somerset Herald, of all his books and manuscripts dealing with the subjects of heraldry, pedigrees, archaeology, etc., with provision for a suitable bookcase to house the entire collection. This handsome mahogany case bearing the Green arms was placed in the library in 1927.

In the same year the trustees and surviving members of the Mechanics' Institute handed over to the Society their property in Red Lion Street.

This building, which has been considerably extended by Mr. Maples, now houses the very fine collection of British and foreign birds which he has recently presented to the Society and to which he is continually adding fresh specimens. It is now known as the Bird Museum.

The present flourishing condition of the Society is largely due to the untiring energy and great generosity of Mr. Maples who, after 36½ years as secretary, resigned that office in 1935. He now occupies the position of President.

Membership of the Society is by ballot, the original old ballot box being used, one black ball in four or part of four or in any circumstances three black balls is sufficient to secure exclusion.

Meetings are held monthly between October and May at which papers are read. Occasionally non-members and ladies are admitted. Almost any subject may be discussed except politics and religion, which are strictly barred, for as Maurice Johnson remarks these are subjects "upon which every man thinks himself wise."

In the early days several of the poems of Gay and Pope were communicated by the authors themselves and in 1751 we find a certain "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," was read which had just before come out anonymously. A number of the early papers are printed in full in Nichol's "Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica", 1790, which also contains a detailed history of the early days of the Society with list of

members as does Nichols' "Literary Anecdotes," Vol. VI, 1812. Several of these papers are of special local interest, viz :—

"An Historical Account of the State of Learning in Spalding, Elloe, Holland, Lincolnshire." (M.J.)

"On the Assize of Bread." (M.J.)

"On the Mint of Lincoln." (M.J.)

"Account of the Ten Buildings most remarkable for their beauty, use, antiquity or notoriety," annexed as ornaments to a map or plan of Spalding, drawn by Mr. Grundy, senr.

"Account of a Deed Poll relating to Skirbeck Hospital in the County of Lincoln."

"Mr. Johnson on a Chantry at Louth." (M.J.)

"The Manner and Process of the Election, Approbation, Confirmation and Investiture or Installation of William de Littleport, Prior of Spalding."

"Spalding Vicars from Lincoln Registers."

In recent years we find many communications on art, architecture, archaeology, literature, science and ornithology contributed both by members of the Society and also by distinguished visitors who often generously say that they esteem it an honour to address such an ancient society.

The headmaster of Spalding Grammar School has always had the privilege of bringing one of his senior boys to the meetings.

Photograph by Mr. G. W. Bailey.

Lecture Hall and Library of Spalding Gentlemen's Society.

The old ballot box is on the table at the left corner.
The Everard Green Bookcase is on the right.

Liquid refreshments are no longer provided but members are allowed to smoke.

In the summer an annual outing is held generally to some place of outstanding archaeological, historical or artistic interest. Many of the stately homes of England, within reach, have extended a welcome to the Society on these occasions.

The present museum contains many objects of local interest, bygones, pottery, glass, coins and tokens, prints, engravings, and drawings, medals and pewter. The library, of about twenty thousand volumes dealing with the various subjects for which the Society stands, contains a fine collection of manuscripts, books, and pamphlets on Lincolnshire. The Bird Museum, which is occasionally thrown open to the public, has many rare specimens.

Maurice Johnson at times evidently had fears for the Society's future for in a letter to his friend, Gale, he observes "realms and all communities have their periods." He was, however, assured by Gale that the "Supellex Literaria of the Society would remain a glorious monument of the public spirit and learning of the founder and the record of a noble attempt which otherwise would scarcely be credited by posterity." This brief article has endeavoured to show that the "noble attempt" is still bringing forth good fruit.

Those wishing for more information about the early days of the Society and its members will find it in the two works previously mentioned, the Dictionary of National Biography and "The Gentlemen's Society at Spalding, its origin and progress" by the Rev. W. Moore, D.D. (Pickering, 1851).

Copyright reserved by the Author,
G. W. BAILEY, F.R.S.A.
Honorary Curator and Secretary.