

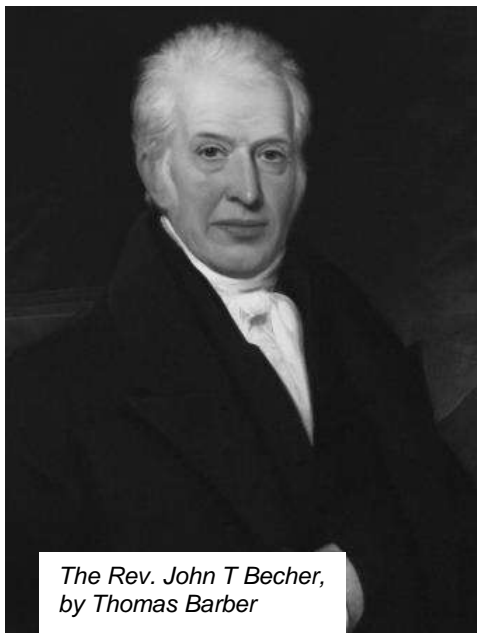
FROM THEIR SOUTHWELL TO OURS

by Rob Smith

Rob Smith of Southwell, Notts, England first happened upon the link between Nottinghamshire and our Ndlambe area while researching the history of the County House of Correction in the Notts Archives. Intrigued by the story of the Southwell 1820 settlement, he visited S Africa in 2016, meeting the Stirks of Southwell and some LAHS members. Rob published the results of his enthusiastic and extensive research as 'Nottinghamshire Settlers and Locations in the Eastern Cape of Good Hope' in 2019 in pdf format, and his book in 2020 (see page 62).

When 1820 settler Benjamin Keeton was asked to name the School chapel for which he had donated land and other resources, he chose the name of his home town, Southwell, which was also applied to the surrounding farming district and field-cornetcy.

The history of this English town is so diverse it is difficult to find an overriding theme as you would attach to (say) a mining village. Industry has come and gone including rope-making, cotton, silk, framework knitting, tanning and flour milling. Machine lace-making took place at the former County House of Correction (HOC). This enterprise governed the national machine curtain lace industry during WWII, because the latter was converted for the war effort producing mosquito, sand fly and camouflage netting. The railway network reached Southwell in 1847, mainly for access to industrial and commercial markets, but it was closed as part of general rationalisation in the 1960s. The HOC had been enlarged on a new site from 1808 to provide a range of productive activities and its progressive inmate management system was emulated at national and international levels.



*The Rev. John T Becher,
by Thomas Barber*

The original HOC of 1611 had been established as part of an extension to the Elizabethan Poor Law which was superseded by the New Poor Law from 1834. Southwell was very much a part of the nineteenth century national debate on pauperism, commencing with the establishment of two workhouses for the destitute. Reports of the day include references to the emigration plan to the Eastern Cape, which was regarded mainly as another measure to alleviate poverty. From 1824 the Southwell Union Workhouse, now a National Trust visitor attraction, served a large swathe of Nottinghamshire. The Rev John Becher was behind the project and he produced an influential pamphlet, *The Anti-pauper System: Investigation into the Effects of the Poor Laws*, in 1828. Though the workhouses were harsh and deterrent, he encouraged self-help promoting his savings schemes at parliamentary level. Becher's

colleague, George Nicholls, went on to become one of just three national Poor Law commissioners and was later described as 'father of the Victorian workhouse'.

Southwell had the traditional social amenities including a cinema, dancehalls, theatre, clubs, societies and the assembly rooms. Cricket, rugby, football, golf and tennis are some of the opportunities for amateur sport with some very successful teams and

several individuals progressing to elite levels. The Southwell Racecourse, with its all-weather surface and floodlighting, reflects a long history of equestrian activity in the vicinity.

Aspiring young poet, Lord Byron, stayed with his mother at Burgage Manor during school vacations between 1803 and 1808. His early literary career was influenced by the aforementioned John Becher, no mean poet in his own right, and Elizabeth Pigot, who remained his life-long literary soul-mate.

Education has been another success story through traditional grammar and boarding schools and today's more modern institutions. Nottingham Trent University's Brackenhurst Agricultural College was once the magnificent home and gardens of textile magnate, William Norton Hicking. In 1917 he handed over the house for the war effort and was later rewarded with a knighthood for his generosity. As part of the extensive agricultural activity in the district, the Merryweather family was noted for its market garden produce, but is especially famed for its Bramley Apple.

There is evidence of both Stone Age and Iron Age settlement. The town has remnants of one of the largest Roman villas in the Midlands and there are subterranean foundations from a large vexillation fortress (legionary and auxiliary troops), one of only 14 found in England. An important Roman road, the Fosse Way, from the southwest of England to Lincolnshire, runs through the Severn and Trent valleys. Coupled with the adjacent rivers, it was probably a supply route for the troops along a natural barrier between Romanised Celts to the east and hostile tribes to the west. In this respect Southwell may be regarded as a former frontier settlement.



Left: This watercolour painting by John Smith 1969, of the Southwell Minster viewed from the south east, hangs in the Church of St James, Southwell, Ndlambe. 'Presented by Mr and Mrs J W Humberstone, Southwell, Notts, England.' (Photo: Sue Gordon)

The presence of the Minster¹, a cathedral since 1884, indicates that religion was and is an important part of

Southwell life, but Anglicanism is not the only faith on offer. There is an excellent Methodist Church and the first workhouse was converted for use by the thriving Baptist community. In AD 625 it is said that Paulinus, Archbishop of York, stopped near Southwell to baptise converts. Then in AD 956 Archbishop Oskytel was granted the manor which, by the time of the Norman Conquest, had increased to 20,000 acres and

¹ 'A Minster was a church run by priests who worked and preached in the surrounding villages. A Cathedral is the church of a Bishop who looks after the religious life of his district or diocese. There was no Bishop at Southwell until 1884.' From the booklet 'Look at Southwell Minster' at St James Church, Southwell

later became the southern seat of successive Archbishops of York. The building of the Minster took place from 1108 and was completed by 1300. Archbishop's Palace was built alongside the Minster in the 1360s. Only ruins now remain, but the unique Chapter House, with its intricate stone carvings, 'The Leaves' observed by Cardinal Wolsey, has been preserved intact. The 1846 Holy Trinity Church perception was that the Latin Eucharist was too 'high church' for ordinary family worship. It also accommodated a growing population.

Numbered among the many grand dwellings are the prebendal houses of the secular canons forming the cathedral chapter. As parish priests they needed a place to stay during their Southwell duties, but some sublet their houses, so eventually the Minster established the Residence for use by whichever canon was on duty according to a rota. It is now occupied by the full-time Dean.

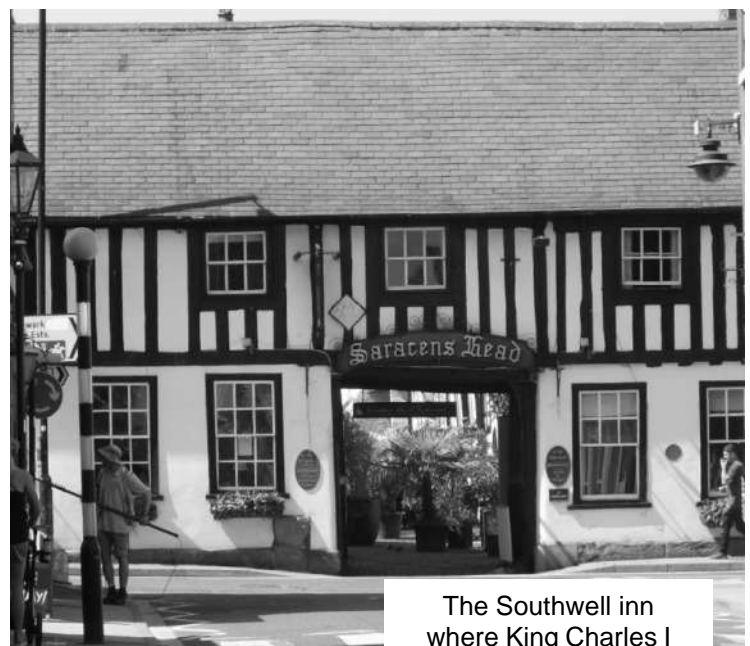
Other large houses were built by wealthy local families as part of a process of gentrification. Such families intermarried to form extensive dynasties in control of the town and district. Some of the Bechers—were magistrates and clergymen, and John was appointed Vicar-General at the Minster. Others became lawyers and attorneys. John's cousin, Richard Turner Becher, attorney, was the father of Mary Becher whose second marriage to William Keeton produced Benjamin and his sister, Susanna. Some of Susanna's letters to her brother are held in the Cory Library.

The Bechers originated in Ireland. Another branch of the family was established in Bristol. It is known that they engaged in slavery, and that some of the wealth of the Southwell branch arose from investments in that abominable trade, but they pulled out early, long before abolition. As early as 1778 Minster canon Peter Peckard wrote his influential anti-slavery pamphlet, *Am I not a Man and a Brother*.

King Charles I surrendered in Southwell at the end of the English Civil War in 1646. He had taken up rooms in the Saracens Head. This establishment is representative of a long tradition of quality coaching inns and alehouses in the town.

Today, Southwell has a population hovering around 7,000. In terms of architecture the town remains much as it was in the past although some of the older buildings have been repurposed. Additional modern and affordable housing has appeared, especially in the outskirts, and several new retirement and care homes have been styled in sympathy with the traditional setting.

Notwithstanding the recent spectre of a pandemic ghost town, a few streets of small shops and the open markets are popular with tourists attending historic attractions and events such as the annual music festivals, racing and fairs. As well as the stores, services and hospitality businesses, the economy is thriving from the presence of professionals and fairly affluent retirees.



The Southwell inn where King Charles I surrendered in 1646



Southwell Minster today

REFERENCES

- Shilton, R. *History of Southwell*. 1818
- Southwell Local History Society (multiple contributors). *Southwell, the Town and its People*, Vols 1 & 2, 1992 and 2006
- Southwell Local History Society (multiple contributors) *A Brief Guide to the History of Southwell*, 2017
- Beresford, M. *Roman Southwell and Environs*. 2019
- Smith, R *Nottinghamshire House of Correction, Southwell*. 2015
- O'Neill, J. *The Life and Times of J T Becher of Southwell*. 2002
- Mason, S. *Nottingham Lace 1760s -1950s*. 1994
- Hardstaff, R. *Human Cargo, the Southwell Connection*. 2004
- Boyes, M. *Love Without Wings* (regarding Lord Byron and Elizabeth Pigot). 1988