

The Fenwick Improvement of Knowledge Society¹

‘ Knowledge is the treasure of the soul ’

1834-1842.

THE following persons are members of the Society

Nov 16th 1835

1 Andrew Gemmell	6d.	14 John Brown	6d.
2 Daniel Love	6d.	15 John Gemmell Junr	6d.
3 Robert Howat	6d.	16 Mathew Fulton	6d.
4 John Kirkland	6d.	17 William Clark	6d.
5 Thomas Fulton	6d.	18 John Blundell	6d.
6 William Fulton Senr	6d.	19 William Fulton Junr	6d.
7 John Faulds	6d.	20 John Fulton	6d.
8 Alexander Armour	6d.	21 Peter Gemmell	6d.
9 William Morton	6d.	22 William Taylor	6d.
10 Robert Orr	6d.	23 Alexander Dunlop	6d.
11 John Gemmell Senr	6d.	24 Matthew Dunlop	6d.
12 James Taylor	6d.	25 Andrew Cairnduff	6d.
13 Alexander Fulton	6d.	26 Alexr Murdoch	6d.

Robert Howat Clerk

Daniel Love Treasurer

James Taylor Librarian

Oct 13th 1835

The Society purchased Chambers Information for the people for the use of the Members Price 6/3.

Nov. 16th. The Society agreed to uplift one penny at each meeting from each member² and that those who are after halfpast seven oclock in coming to the meeting will be fined in one halfpenny if a Reasonable [excuse] is not given.²

¹ Continued from *Scottish Historical Review*, xvii. 137.

² This rule abolished.

The Fenwick Improvement

The Society purchased a Catechism of Phrenology Price 1/-
Decr 28. 1835.

It was agreed that William Morton be Clerk to the Society.

The Society purchased a Catechism of Geography Price 9d.
March 7th.

The Society purchased a pamphlet on England Ireland & America Price 6d. April 4th.

The Society purchased a pamphlet on Ireland and O'connel price 8d. May 2d.

The Society purchased Milton's prose (select) works Price 10sh 6d. May 13th.

The Society purchased Tait's exposure of the spy System.

1837. January 23. Elected officebearers for the ensuing year
viz John Gemmell Clerk Thomas Fulton Treasurer James Taylor Librarian

1838. January 8th. Elected officebearers for the ensuing year
viz Thomas Fulton Treasurer John Kirkland Librarian

John Gemmell } Secretaries
James Taylor }

Oct 29th. The following Resolution which was stated at the previous meeting was finally adopted

That on every alternate meeting or monthly ; each member shall bring forward a written article, either original, or copied, which he shall read to the society.

1839. January 21st. Elected for the ensuing year

James Taylor Treasurer

Thomas Fulton } Secretaries
John Gemmell }

John Kirkland Librarian.

1840 January 6

1841 January 4 [Same list as in 1839 repeated]

1842 January 3

[1841.] April 12. Resolved, that reading papers be discontinued.

[1842.] July 4. Resolution carried to dissolve the Society, to be reconsidered (as required by the 13th Article) on July 18.

July 18th. Reversed the above vote and agreed to continue the society.

Elected Alexr Murdoch one of the secretaries, in room of Thomas Fulton resigned.

Note.—Along with the little Minute Book is the following Passport :

By John Craufurd of Craufurdland Preses to the meeting of
Commissioners for the District of Kilmarnock

Permit the Bearer James Hopkine Taylor att ffinnick kirk who is of ane honest and fair character capable to subsist himself by his employment and so noway under the description of the late act of parliament anent the recruiting of his Majestys' Forces to pass and repass to and from Irvine and other places In the prosecution of his lawfull Business without any trouble or molestation He allways behaveing himself as becometh a dutifull and Loyal Subject. Given under my hand Att Craufurdland this twenty second of January 1757

J CRAUFURD

J.P.

To all concerned
[Endorsed]

Pasport
1757.

APPENDIX.

MINUTES &C. OF THE FENWICK EMIGRATION SOCIETY. APRIL 23 1839.

Regulations.

Preamble—A fearful gloom is fast thickening over the horizon of our country. Every prospect of comfort to the working man is daily becoming darker and more dreary. Trade and manufactures are rapidly leaving our shores. And, to all appearance, a crisis is at hand, in which the sufferings of the working classes will in the first instance, form a prominent feature. It is desirable therefore, that they should have it in their power, as far as possible, to avoid the miseries to which a large portion of the community must be reduced by the depression of wages, scarcity of work, and starvation by hunger through the operation of the corn laws. This can be best effected by fleeing from the scene of destitution and distress. But as it cannot be effected without considerable expence, and as few working men can command a sufficient fund for that purpose, unless by the gradual process of weekly deposits, it is hereby proposed to form an association for the purpose of encouraging emigration amongst the working classes, and of acquiring the means necessary for the accomplishment of that object. The following regulations will form the basis of the association.

[There follows a constitution, providing for weekly deposits which were to be consigned on deposit in bank. The application of the moneys is sufficiently indicated by the sixth regulation :—]

6th. That if any member is going abroad he may have the whole amount of his deposits with interest due (except on the deposits of the current half-year if incomplete) at any time, by giving ten days' warning to the Treasurer. If he is not going abroad or has a claim by article 7th he cannot receive any money till the half-yearly meeting.

[At half-yearly meeting the interest was distributed according to the shares of capital contributed. At the first half-yearly meeting Nov 5 1839 the total deposits were £66, and the interest distributed only 7s. 3d., but the balance of funds in hand had risen in December 1851 to £381, and the dividend of interest was £10 10s. 11d. Several entries in the Minutes are of interest as regards emigration, and several references occur to persons whose names also appear in the record of the Fenwick Improvement of Knowledge Society. Accordingly a few extracts will be of value towards the editing of the latter.]

Fenwick May 1 1839. A meeting was held this evening according to arrangement in Mr Cairnduffs school, when the Association was formed by subscribing the regulations. The following persons were also chosen managers Alexander Dunlop Preses Matthew Fulton Clerk John Taylor Treasurer and Allan Galt, Thomas Fulton, William Bicket and William Morton ordinary managers.

June 4 1839. The Society held its first monthly meeting when an interesting account of the passage and safe arrival at New York of four emigrants from the Parish of Fenwick was laid before them.

Augt 6 1839. Some extracts were read from a letter from an emigrant who has located himself at Parkhill, Saltfleet, County of Wentworth, District of Gore, Upper Canada, N.B. America.

Sept 3 1839. Notes from extracts of a letter in the Ayrshire Examiner No from a Settler in New Zealand were read to the society.

Oct 1 1839. The Society held their monthly meeting this evening when a part of Chambers No 5 of the 'Information to the people' on emigration to the United States was read.

Dec 3 1839. Held the monthly meeting, when a few extracts from an emigrants letter was given concerning the state of America and the qualification necessary for emigrants thither.

Apr 17 1840. Uplifted for behoof of Mr Matthew Fulton who is going to America.

2 May 1848. The Preses Robert Gilmour having left for Glasgow James Taylor occupies his place.

November 16 1857. Intimation being previously given the Emigration Society met this evening to elect a President in the room of James Taylor deceased when John Fulton was unanimously chosen to that office.

NOTE BY GEO. NEILSON, LL.D.

It is impossible to glance at the themes discussed without an impression that the superior character of the intellectual standpoint, which on the whole is reflected, may have been due to the dominating force of one or two individuals in the Society. While 'the Utility of Societys for the Improvement of Knowledge' might be a commonplace enough commencement of programme, the second item, the debate between implicit belief as against rational conviction, raised the great issue of Faith *versus* Reason, and

showed the rationalistic bent. The affirmation of voluntarism in religion as against establishment, and still more the preference of republicanism to monarchy, are expressions of well-defined revolutionary tendency even when checked by the qualification that the replacement of monarchy by a republic should be achieved not by physical but by moral means.

American institutions evidently made their appeal to some of the members, though we have no record of the night when the contest between America and Britain was discussed. On the labour problem the vote in favour of repealing restrictive laws, the 'General Conversation on the State of Society,' and the pronouncement in favour of household suffrage, serve as a reminder that in 1835 the once revolutionary movement was passing through its phase of reform and radicalism on the way to Chartism. As regards 'the once popular doctrine of Ghosts and Witches' the note of emancipation from credulity is emphatic.

Various views, as for instance on science and religion, on the ceremony of marriage and on the temperance question, are as interesting in their social significance as are the political proposal to dispense with the House of Lords, the cautious resolution about 'the lawfulness and propriety of blood-eating,' and the versatility of these rural discussions ranging with assured freedom from the abstractions of political principle to the niceties of literary preference and taste.

The discourse on astronomy by Thomas Fulton introduces a most interesting connection with a somewhat famous mechanical construction, of which Fenwick is entitled to the honour. This is the orrery constructed by John Fulton. It is not without significance that the ingenious and surprising mechanical rendering of the celestial movements should have had as its antecedent the studies of astronomy pursued by and discussed in the Fenwick Society. As a community the village circle manifested a quite unusual intellectual aptitude, and their keen political sense was reflected in such bodies as the Fenwick Weavers' Society, founded in 1761, the Masons' Society, and the Friendly Society, which were all maintaining their activities during the period of these village debates. Another association expressive of a thoughtful and provident standpoint among the people was formed in 1839: this was the Fenwick Emigration Society, of which some general impression may be formed from the few extracts from the minutes given in the appendix, *supra*. It reveals the villager of Fenwick as a thrifty Scot with a keen eye upon his prospects in life, and a shrewd as well as courageous determination to adopt the career offering the higher promise.

The Preamble, product of a period when the Chartist movement was rapidly approaching the explosive point, reflects the rhetorical pessimism of its time. The industrial crisis was no doubt severe, but the gloom of the Preamble was perhaps hardly warranted. Yet it can scarcely be doubted that such emigration societies as that of Fenwick were serviceable and wise institutions whereby (on the principle long familiar in building societies) the modest weekly contributions of the members became, when emigration was resolved upon, available to assist their settlement in the new world beyond the ocean.

To return, however, to the debates of the Improvement Society. The notice of the competitive readings of the 'Tory poets' on the one hand, and of Byron as the sole representative of the more progressive view, with the decisive conclusion reached after the experiment, will be perused with amused interest for its naïve combination of critical and political opinion. Paper currency, land nationalisation, 'the moral effect of Poetry,' as well as its generally 'radical tendency,' the discussions of geology, and the record of book purchases made by the Society, all attest a characteristic inclination of mind of a sturdy and alert membership. Their New Year meetings of 1838 and 1839 are felicitously recorded with a pen evidently flowing with sympathy for the social, political, sentimental, poetical, oratorical, musical, and genial traits exhibited by the company on each occasion. Such meetings were doubtless memories of joy to the participants, and certainly the gleeful company was happy in its secretary, whose detailed record now challenges the criticism of a wider world than that of the little Fenwick circle. Despite their discontents and dubieties, and the gloom that brooded over their political and industrial outlook, there was room in their hearts and in their lives for gaiety and wit and eloquence, the flashes of which still shine from the faded page.