



Dr Johnson in Lincolnshire

Samuel Johnson, whose Dictionary was published 250 years ago this month, held both the county and its people in great affection

Words and Photograph: Peter Criddle

Below: Langton by Spilsby Church showing the three-decker pulpit

Opposite top: Dr Johnson in his travelling dress

Opposite bottom: Bennet Langton

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was the son of a Lichfield bookseller but, after studying at Oxford, he settled for the rest of his life in London. There he established himself as the Great Cham or Monarch of Literature. His ground-breaking English Dictionary was his masterpiece but today he is above all remembered as a conversationalist as a result of James Boswell's biography of the great man.

Johnson loved his life in London, where he was revered by the eminent members of the Literary Club he founded. But he also had a very affectionate regard for Lincolnshire, having been introduced to the county by a young friend, Bennet Langton, who lived with his parents at Langton Hall, near Spilsby.

As only a teenager, Bennet Langton had been captivated by Johnson's writings and had travelled down to London in the hope of being introduced to him. Johnson was easy of access and a meeting was arranged. Langton was certainly surprised on seeing his hero. He had expected a decent, well-dressed, decorous philosopher. Instead he was confronted by a huge, uncouth, shambling

figure with a little dark wig which scarcely covered his head and his clothes hanging loose about him. Despite this and a nearly thirty-year difference in age, Johnson and Bennet Langton became lifelong friends. And Langton himself went on to be a famous classicist and a member of the Literary Club.

Johnson's developing friendship with the Langton family made him look forward to visiting them at home in the Lincolnshire countryside, 'to hear the ocean roar, or to see the stars twinkle, in the company of men to whom Nature does not spread her volumes or utter her voice in vain'. And eventually Johnson did, on at least one occasion, spend a considerable time at Langton.

The old Hall at Langton, where Johnson went to stay in 1764, his young friend still living under his father's roof, no longer exists. But Langton's church remains. Built in the 1720s in the classical Georgian style, its inside appearance with its three-deck pulpit and inward facing pews, is just as it would have been when Dr Johnson worshipped there with the Langtons. In fact, the little church is itself almost an epitome of the Georgian Church of England which Samuel Johnson loved.

Johnson was a deeply religious man and Mr Langton senior went so far as to suggest he should take Holy Orders and become Rector of Langton, the living being in the Langton family's gift. Johnson felt unable to take such steps and subsequently indeed, as Boswell reports, because in the course of discussion Johnson, 'sometimes mentioned what might be said in favour of the peculiar tenets of the Romish church', old Mr Langton went to his grave believing him secretly to be of that communion.

Dr Johnson also met and got on well with Bennet Langton's Uncle Peregrine who lived in the old house opposite the church at Partney. Peregrine Langton was a bachelor who had lived all his life in the village and he was an old man in his eighties when Johnson used to walk over from Langton to see him. Johnson



was most impressed not only by his piety but by his well-organised 'Oeconomy'. Peregrine Langton did not own his house and his only income was from a £200 a year annuity and £18 a year paid for board by his sister who lived with him. Yet out of this he paid £28 a year rent for the house, kept two maids and two men in livery, had three or four-course meals and entertained frequently. And he kept a postchaise and three horses. His own appearance as to clothes was always neat and plain and not less than a tenthpart of his income was set apart for charity.

Samuel Johnson and Bennet Langton were on a par intellectually but the younger man was quiet and reserved whereas Johnson was larger than life and loud in his enthusiasms. This was exemplified by his famous rolling down the sheepwalks at Langton. At the top of the hill, the revered and somewhat aged London philosopher suddenly decided it would be fun to roll himself over and over down the hill across the mysterious sheepwalk terracing. And, clearing his pockets, he enjoyed rolling his huge, ungainly body to the bottom.

From the time he had journeyed to see the student Langton at Oxford to when, at nearly seventy, he spent five days with Langton, the militia captain, in camp with the Lincolnshire Militia at Warley Common in Essex, their occasional excursions together continued but the journey by stagecoach up to Lincolnshire was an arduous one for an old man to face. And Johnson had written nostalgically a year or two after his 1794 visit: "Many a time I placed myself at Langton and imagined the pleasure with which I should walk to Partney in a summer morning but this is no longer possible." So his enthusiasm for Lincolnshire very much remained and he apparently even suggested to Langton that he would like to see him write a history of the county.

Another famous Lincolnshire man who became a member of Johnson's Literary Club was Sir Joseph Banks of Revesby. Banks (1743-1820) was very much younger than Johnson who seems to have been initially rather irritated by the brilliant young man's seemingly effortless success. Commenting on Banks' circumnavigating of the world with Captain Cook in which he had made wonderful natural history collections, Johnson said there was 'very little intellectual' in the voyage and told a friend he thought Banks 'had not gained much by circumnavigating the world'.

The latter remark was really perhaps just a comment on young Banks' immaturity and Johnson eventually came to know and like him well. And the two Lincolnshire men, Banks and Langton, were eventually among the half dozen closest friends who acted as pallbearers at Dr Johnson's funeral.

To mark the 250th anniversary of the publication of the dictionary and Dr Johnson's county connections, St Peter and St Paul's Church at Langton by Spilsby will be holding a concert at 7pm on Saturday, 16th April. The concert will feature organist Tony Hancock and various choral performers. There will be a retiring collection in aid of church funds.

