

Watter Joe and Peggy Airey

Two of the most talked about portraits in the Cooper Gallery Collection is Watter Joe and Peggy Airey by Cawthorne artist Abel Hold. **Tracey Hebron** takes a look at the lives of the Barnsley characters depicted.

‘Watter Joe’ Joseph Broadhead (1772-1852)

JOSEPH BROADHEAD WAS an eccentric waterman, the son of Caleb and Ruth Broadhead. His family occupied Thrumpton Hall in Nottingham as a farm before taking another on at Woodsetts, Yorkshire. Joseph’s father died shortly after his birth. His mother remarried and moved to London leaving Joe to be brought up by a paternal aunt Mary and her husband William Earnshaw in Kirkburton. Here he spent his youth, acquired his education and learnt the art of weaving.



Weaving becomes his trade, archive material suggests he often boasted of having being ‘the best lindsey weaver at Shepley’, his work being better by a penny a yard than that of any other persons. After a few years at Shepley he goes on to become a footman for a Mr Emmanuel Helam of Hunslet. On the 10 January 1798 he marries Hannah Lees. The same year they have a son and name him Caleb. Sadly Hannah dies around 1800 of dropsy and is buried near Brighthouse. Joe then moves to Barnsley around 1806. This was probably for work as the linen trade in Barnsley flourished at this time. He took various jobs weaving and also in farming.

Later records show he ‘made circuits of certain villages in vending potatoes’ for a Mr Lister. However after an incident where his horse bolts and results in him crashing into a garden wall, he loses his job. He then gets his own horse and cart and he begins water vending in 1816, continuing to do so for 26 years. Water selling was a good trade. In 1811 the population was 5014 and in 1821 the population was 8286. The town was reliant on wells and springs for fresh water. He had a water cart and a horse called ‘Old Duke’. He worked on the streets of Barnsley daily and became a familiar sight in the town, acquiring the nickname of ‘Original Waterman’ from having originated the business of vending water about the streets. He often wore his broad brimmed hats and top boots with heavy wooden soles and few could resist the opportunity of cracking a joke with ‘old Joe’.

In 1820 when the New Beer Act came in to operation he had a pub named after him, The Watter Joe, opposite the town pumps. A sign outside the pub read:

*‘All you who love a social drop,
Come in and sit you down,
And here you’ll find as good as a tap,
As any in the town*

*The Merry host with jest and song,
Will keep you on the go
Come then and taste this liquor strong
Come drink with Water Joe’.*

Later in life he struggled to live on a very meagre income. He received 2s 6d per week from the parish. He would carry coal and manure in a barrow to sell at a profit. The last ten years of his life he occupied a small apartment in Becketts’ Square at the rate of nine pence a week. He died aged 80 on the 28 December 1852 and was buried at the Friends burial ground Barnsley. Many respectable people attended his funeral.

‘Peggy Airey’ Margaret Maggott (1759-1848)

MARGARET MAGGOTT was a well-known local character and another familiar face in Barnsley in the 19th century. She was often seen walking around the town wearing a bright red coat, an old print bonnet and always carrying a stick. She was often seen searching for and collecting items that could be sold for small change or bits of coal and sticks to use for fuel.



On market days she was a conspicuous figure on Market Hill and Church Street. For a fee she would tell your fortune and at Christmas and New Year she would make visits to the wealthy to wish them good luck for the year ahead. It is said that many ‘well-to-do’ families in the town would reserve crumbs and scraps for her. She lived alone in the Barebones area of Barnsley. Sadly little more is recorded. She died aged 89 on 23 January in 1848.

Her image continues to inspire, and in 2008 contemporary folk/acoustic duo Gilmore and Roberts, who have been nominated for two BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards, wrote a song called ‘Peggy Airey’ described as ‘a fast-paced folk song based on the nineteenth century woman who appeared on the streets of Barnsley and wished everyone well at Christmas’. With the catchy chorus lyric ‘Peggy wish me well’ the song is often requested by fans.

It is interesting to consider why Abel Hold chose to paint these two people. Unlike many portraits it can be assumed that these people did not pay the artist to paint their likenesses. Maybe Hold felt that their popularity as local characters would ensure that they would sell.

At one time the portraits were owned by Mr H Jackson of Darfield Rectory before being bought by James Fox who hung them in the bar at the Queen’s Hotel, Regent Street. Hold was a well-respected artist both locally and nationally and Fox was occasionally criticised for hangings these paintings in what some people considered to be an inappropriate setting. The portraits now hang in the Fox wing of the Cooper Gallery on Church Street, where they continue to be admired, not just because of the quality of the paintings, but as real Barnsley people of the past.

If you know more about either Watter Joe or Peggy Airey I would love to hear from you. Please email TraceyHebron@hotmail.com

Images used by kind permission of the Trustees of the Cooper Gallery