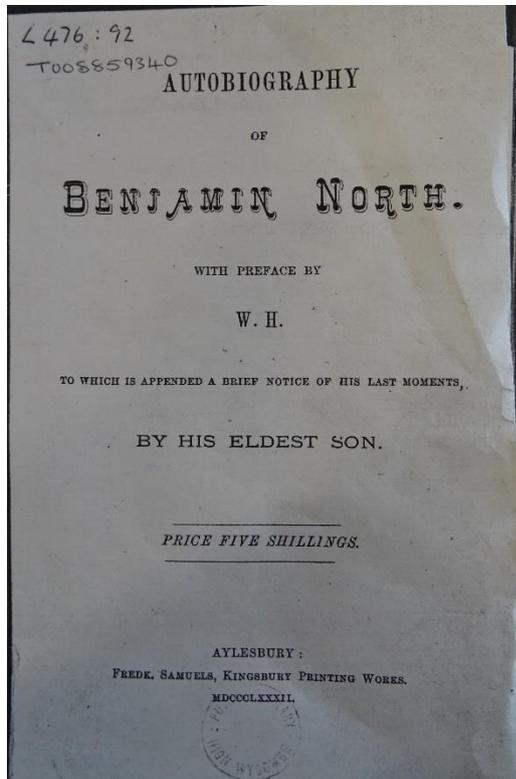


Benjamin North life story

The following details of Benjamin North are from his autobiography, which is an invaluable account of rural poverty in the early 19th century. He ended up owning a furniture factory employing over 200 people, but started from a very poor early life.



Photocopy available at High Wycombe reference library.

He was born in Thame in 1811, the youngest of 8 children. His father was an agricultural labourer and his mother died when he was only four. He describes a very hard childhood with so much domestic work to do, including having to make his father a tea each day when he was too young to even be able to lift the kettle, and sitting up late helping to mend their clothes. He had to share a bed with his father and a brother.

His earliest recollection was a “sweetmeat” shop run by Mrs Treadwell across the road from his house, and begging his father for some money to buy the sweets. But he also remembered many cruel sports in Thame such as bull-baiting, dog-fighting, and cock-fighting. A bulldog would pin a bull by the nose, and the cocks had steel spurs. But he thought men fighting, and playing at sword-fighting, was worse as men should know better than animals who were only acting on instinct. There was also hurdle-jumping, sack-jumping and climbing a greasy pole for a leg of mutton.

He only had two years education from an elder lady in the village, costing 2d per week, but was treated very kindly.

Times were hard because of the war with France which ended in 1815. (But also 1816 was the “year without a summer” with very bad harvests hence high prices.) His first job was as a shepherd at Moreton, 1km SW of Thame, then “bird-keeping” in Thame, i.e. keeping birds away from crops, then another shepherding job.

He wanted to see his sister in Acton, and got a ride with Mr Rowland's wagon. The journey was about 37 miles but took a day and two nights. He stayed with his sister for a few weeks seeing many sights in London before returning on the same wagon. All through the autobiography and in newspaper accounts, waggon trips taking goods were done at night. The reason for this is not known, it must have been more difficult in the dark and drivers were frequently falling asleep.

He then worked as a plough-boy in Thame, and made some trips to High Wycombe to take a load of corn. **He sometimes had charge of a wagon and three horses, which was useful experience for his later job as commercial traveller.** As a plough boy he had to be up at 4am in summer, his food was bread and lard, sometimes a little cheese, and tiny bit of meat once a week. He spent all day behind the plough walking up and down through the muddy field till his feet were carrying 3 or 4 pounds of clay. Later on he talks about the farm labourers being fed by the farmer's wife, but poor food. He tells a tale of a farm labourer being given a meat broth for breakfast and he starts to take his clothes off. The farmer's wife asks what he is doing and he says he is going to swim around to try to catch a bit of beef.

This may be with his father's employer, because his father then got a new job at North Weston, so Benjamin also had to walk the three miles from Thame to the same farm and back each day, and then walked up and down the fields driving the plough. He had to carry his lunch to work, still bread and lard for breakfast and lunch, and eat in a cold barn.

His father then found him a new job at a paper mill in Deddington, between Bicester and Banbury, where his brother Jeremiah already worked. Father and son walked 35 miles to the mill. When he finished his apprenticeship at the paper mill, the owner kept him on, but Benjamin felt he did not now have to obey every command, so he refused to work on Sundays and was given a fortnight's notice to quit, but fortunately the manager found him a job in a different part of the business that did not need Sunday work. He joined the Methodists on a 3 month trial in June 1834, and was then fully accepted, and lodged with a Methodist who taught him to read and write. Failure of the paper mill three months after finishing his apprenticeship threw him out of work, due to mechanisation of the industry. Luddites were destroying machines all over the country, but Mr North saw that machines create work, and humans cannot do all the work needed by hand.

In early 1835 he walked with his older friend and former co-worker Mr Hugh Jones, through nearly every county of England for over five months, covering nearly 3,000 miles, to find work in the paper trade but had no luck. The machines had destroyed any hope of Benjamin finding work in the paper industry with his manual skills, so he went back to Thame and worked in a hay-field until his hands were bleeding from the hay-fork, and even digging gravel for roads.

Benjamin North starts as a wood turner, then chair salesman

Mr Randel, a chair turner of Thame offered Benjamin a job. He could not pay a premium to be apprenticed, so worked for just 1 shilling a day. Benjamin tried to learn all the business so when there was no turning to do, he did sawing instead. **For this short time he was actually working with wood, which was useful experience for setting up a business later.** Then Mr Randel offered him a job as a travelling salesman, because of the 3,000 miles he had walked, he knew the geography of the country. **So that terrible hardship had helped his career.**

His first journey was to Tewksbury where he sold all the chairs, then made a trip north through Cambridge, where someone stole his coat, and onto Wisbeach where he sold the last chairs. Mr Randel did not have any chairs ready, so he set out with a load of chairs from Messrs Staples and sold them all in Stourbridge, but went back to work for Mr Randel because his chairs were better quality.

He made a trip to Gloucester and shared a hotel room with *the great chairmaker* Thomas Harris and his son. Mr Harris was a chairmaker, grocer and a Wesleyan preacher from West Wycombe, who appreciated Mr North reading the bible to them last thing at night and first thing in the morning. Mr Harris had a look at his load of chairs and said they were “not first class”. He then got a letter from Mr Harris in March 1837 (aged 26) offering him a job as a commercial traveller, (although he had 4 different job offers at the time !), went to West Wycombe for an interview and liked the character of the Harris’s and the men in the (work)shop so he agreed to take this job. **So his conversion to Methodism had helped him to be offered this job.** The normal rate of pay was 18s a week, plus expenses while travelling, the Harris’s offered £1 a week but Mr North would only take 18s until he had proved himself.



Benjamin North and wife Dinah in later life. By kind permission of the North family.

In 1853 Benjamin North started a furniture factory in West Wycombe, and by 1871 was employing 123 people. He retired to Northampton in 1872. The business continued until at least the 1950’s, and made furniture for three royal coronations.

Source

Autobiography of Benjamin North, photocopy available at High Wycombe reference library.