Old West Bromwich 101 02.03.1945 W.E. Jephcott

James Keir, Hill Top’s Most Famous Man

Captain James Keir

Witton Lane marks the commencement of Hill Top as distinct from Holloway Bank.

Where there is a row of 5 shops opposite Hawkes Lane there was formerly one large house, known as Finchpath Hall. 150 years ago it was occupied by Captain James Keir, FRS of whom the Rev Samuel Lees wrote, “We hold him to be the greatest man the parish has known as a resident”. It is rather a reflection upon the town’s regard for its distinguished men that it has no memorial of James Keir. After spending 7 years in the West Indies he left the army and after a few changes of residence settled down at Finchpath Hall somewhere about 1770.

Lunar Society Celebrity

Of more interest than his business career were the friendships he formed. He was a member of the famous Birmingham Lunar Society, an association of scientific and literary men who met in turn at the homes of various members. It was called the Lunar Society, because their gatherings took place when the moon was full, so that the men could travel in greater security on their horses along the then unlighted and badly-made roads to and from the rendezvous. The society was founded about 1766 and flourished for nearly forty years. Thus there assembled at Finchpath Hall such distinguished men as Boulton and Watt, Dr. James Priestley, eminent theologian and chemist; Dr. Erasmus Darwin, poet, physician and naturalist; Thomas Day, eccentric philanthropist and author of “Sandford and Merton”; R. Louis Edgeworth, author; John Baskerville, eminent typefounder and printer; William Murdock, inventor of gas lighting; Dr. William Small, physician, chemist and mechanist;, and Samuel Galton, wealthy Quaker and man of letters. These were regular members of the society but occasional visitors included Josiah Wedgwood, the potter; Sir Joseph Banks, botanist; Sir William Henschell, the astronomer; John Smeaton, engineer of Eddystone Lighthouse; Dr. Samuel Parr, famous scholar; Hugh Blair, rhetorician; and other great men.

Finchpath Hall was later divided into two houses named ‘The Poplars’ and ‘The Woodlands’ respectively occupied by Dr.Thomas Sansome and Mr. John Field, the mining engineer.

Priestley Riots Recalled

James Keir presided over the famous dinner in Birmingham in 1791, on the anniversary of the destruction of the Bastille in Paris two years earlier which had as its sequel the notorious Priestley Riots when in four days two chapels had been destroyed, the residences of prominent Dissenters – including Dr. Priestley – burnt out and pillaged, and disgraceful excesses committed in the name of ‘King and Church’, the slogan of the rioters. James Keir lived to be 85, passing away on October 11th, 1820 in his sleep, and he was buried at the Old Church. I have given only a brief resume of the career and association of this Hill Top resident about whom columns could be written.