

John Cornfield

Coseley and poetry are not, with the best will in the world, obvious bedfellows. Wordsworth and Coleridge did not tarry here on a weekend break from the Lake District, nor did John Keats stop to extoll its virtues.

But before we dismiss the connection too readily, it's worth taking a look at a piece of public art on Coseley railway station. A length of fencing alongside the platform, officially described as "serpentine", contains a series of little circular reliefs, complete with a line of verse on each. The first (and last) of them shows a quill pen and an open book.

The images are the work of Steve Field and date from 1995, at a time when Network Rail were keen to make the route between Birmingham and Wolverhampton a sophisticated corridor of artworks.

Steve Field's installation is a tribute to Coseley's very own Romantic poet, a tortured soul who poured out his heart in verse, and who left a very real impression upon his neighbourhood. To this day there's a little bit of the town, just off Hurst Road and Holywell Street, known to locals as "John Cornfield's Backside".

Any implication that the aforesaid Mr Cornfield was prone to mooning should be rejected. The rear of anyone's land is traditionally referred to as the backside.

So who is John Cornfield and why should the Black Country seek to commemorate him ?

John Cornfield first opened his eyes in the Hurst Hill district of Coseley in 1820, the oldest of nine children. Unlike the more famous poets of his time, Cornfield had no Oxbridge education, no private schooling to set him on his way, and no opportunity to imbibe the classics on a whistlestop tour of Greece.

He made a living as a brickmaker, and later as a pawnbroker, running a shop in the town. No doubt the pawnbroking business would have made Cornfield only too aware of the precarious lives of the Black Country poor, pawning their possessions one week to redeem them the next.

O debt ! thou art the honest poor man's hell,
And want is thy inexorable devil...

This and more turned Cornfield into a champion of the poor and something of a ragged trousered philanthropist. Certainly Cornfield won considerable respect locally. He was elected a member of the Sedgley School Board and the Coseley Local Board, as well as a Guardian of the Poor for Dudley Union, doubtless to temper the effects of the New Poor Law. Cornfield launched his writing career with a remarkable tirade against the vicar of Sedgley, who turned his back on his flock for "living in gross darkness".

A Round Unblemished Tale of the Exploits of the Vicar of Sedgley, published in

1842, reflects the attitude of contemporary nonconformity - Cornfield was a Methodist - towards the imposition of tithes to support the Anglican clergy. Add to that more than a touch of Chartism, a sprinkling of Christian Socialism, and clear echo of both Shelley and Godwin, and you have a rare and unusual voice. Certainly not one heard often around the table of Poor Law guardians.

All are brethren, and have equal share,
And should by all means equally possess
The earth, and all there is in sea and air...

Cornfield's beliefs led him further, to vegetarianism, anti-slavery, and to advocating the rights of women.

Sometime in the late 1830s, shortly after his marriage, Cornfield moved to Lower Tower Street in Birmingham, and it may well have been his experience of the Chartist riots of those years that led to his most significant poem. There were similar, though less violent, riots in Sedgley too.

The title poem of *Allan Chace and Other Poems*, issued in 1877, tells the tale of a young idealist whose quest for revolution leads him to kill a policeman, albeit accidentally. The hero sets out to flee to America, and on the way meets a young woman, marries and undergoes a religious conversion. But Allan Chace never reaches the New World, dying en route. It's a pessimistic tale of paradise lost and hope shattered, and more than a little autobiographical.

So we have assembled most of the elements of a Romantic poet: rebellion against authority, bouts of tortured introspection, and a state of mind that veers between rosy idealism and dark disillusionment. There remains only the tragic death.

This was not on a stormy lake in Italy, or in a villa in Rome, or on the seashore of the Hellespont, but down a deep well in a back garden in Coseley. Here John Cornfield chose to end it all on December 6 1890. That, at least, is what the coroner's jury concluded.

Cornfield's behaviour had been erratic for some months before his suicide. His family - a wife and daughter - knew that he was in a dark place, but had not anticipated exactly how dark. The well was on land Cornfield had previously owned, but had been forced to sell. He left his home late one evening and never returned. His body was recovered the following day.

With that John Cornfield fell silent. It is only in the last few years - with the artwork at Coseley railway station and the recent re-issuing of *Allan Chace* by the Kates Hil Press - that the voice of one of the Black Country's most distinctive writers can be heard once more.