



1853

Henry Cooper, the Scugdale Giant – a Tall Tale

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Giants have featured in lore and legend since time immemorial. Perhaps the most famous of all comes from the Bible in the form of Goliath, who was slain by the diminutive shepherd boy, David, with his deadly slingshot. More local to our own area is the legend of Wade, a colossal giant said to be over 100 feet tall! Wade is reputed to have single-handedly built the road over Wheeldale Moor (the Roman road called Wade's Causeway) to make it easier for his wife Bell to tend to and milk her giant cow, which she kept on the moors. Wade is also said to have inadvertently created the Hole of Horcum ('The Devil's Punchbowl') when in anger he scooped up a handful of earth and flung it across the moor at his wife. Fortunately he missed his target, with the result that the prominent conical hill to the east of the 'giant's crater', known as Blakey Topping, came into being at the very spot where Wade's 'handful' fell to the ground.

However, many stories of giants are based on actual facts and known real people. From the North Yorkshire Moors comes the fascinating tale of the Scugdale Giant. Henry Alexander Cooper (known as Harry) was born 1853, although accounts of his place of birth differ. Some claim he was born at Swainby and as a

boy worked on a farm in nearby Scugdale. Perhaps a more trustworthy account states that he was born at Robinson's Yard, Commercial Street, Norton, near Malton, although the Cooper family were known to have moved about the country in search of employment.

Following a few years' schooling, Henry was sent into farm service at High House, Scugdale. He then moved to Rosedale, becoming a mineworker in the thriving ironstone industry. It was there that he suffered a bout of illness that would dramatically change his future life. At the age of 16 he was struck down by a severe fever that kept him confined to bed for 13 weeks. During this period Henry is said to have undergone an abnormal growth spurt in which he grew by an astonishing 16 inches. He had become a giant, standing at 8 feet 6 inches tall - although this is perhaps an exaggeration as it would mean that he was already over 7 feet tall at the age of 16, prior to his illness. He was said to have hands 13 inches long and feet measuring an enormous 17 inches. Henry Cooper had become the tallest known man in Britain and a true Goliath.

He moved again to North Skelton in East Cleveland to work at Fogga, the local ironstone mine. The work in the pit must have been excruciatingly difficult

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for a man with such a huge frame. Henry was a popular character in East Cleveland and became affectionately known as Long Harry. He was a quiet, inoffensive man, although extremely strong. Tales of his unique stature and immense strength were legion.

One day a passing fairground owner spotted Henry and invited him to join his travelling circus: and so began his journey to fame as the world's tallest man. He toured England, visiting many cities and towns. While on tour Henry attracted the attention of Mr P. T. Barnum, who made an offer that Henry duly accepted. He was billed as 'The Yorkshire Giant - Tallest Man in the World', and travelled across America with Barnum's Travelling Show, the 'largest show on earth': quite an adventure for a humble farm boy from Scugdale.

While in the United States, Henry met and married a tall American lady with whom he had children. In 1886

an announcement was placed in the New York Clipper trade magazine stating that Minnie Cooper, Henry's wife, had given birth to a baby weighing 17 pounds. Henry was to tour America and Canada for the rest of his life with various circuses and sideshows.

In 1889, while making his way to Edmonton, Canada, Henry fell ill and had to be left behind in Calgary. Despite receiving medical attention, he passed away quietly at the age of 46. He died surrounded by colleagues of the local Oddfellows, a worldwide fraternal society of which Henry was a member. The Calgary Oddfellows arranged Henry's funeral, carried out the burial duties and assisted at the ceremony. His remains were interred at the Calgary Union Cemetery. At the time of his burial no gravestone was erected but in 2004 surviving members of Henry's family organised the erection of an inscribed memorial headstone.



Find out more

Information on Henry Cooper:

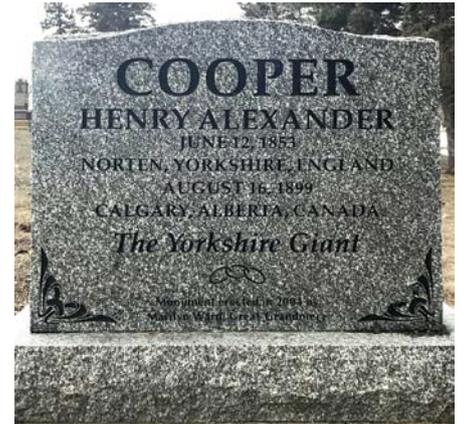
<http://www.thetallestman.com/henryalexandercooper.htm>

Story of P.T. Barnum and his circus:

<http://www.historyextra.com/period/victorian/circus-sensation-pt-barnums-greatest-wheezes/>



Henry Cooper



Henry Cooper's gravestone, Calgary



The road to the dale end, Scugdale



Scugdale