



Poet John Castillo, Bard of the Dales

Jane Ellis

John Castillo, 'The Bard of the Dales', was a stonemason and poet, born in 1792 in Ireland; his father, Patrick Castlehowe, was an itinerant Irish labourer who had come to Yorkshire seeking work, and married Mary Bonas (or Boanas) of Glaisdale, at Danby Church. When John was very young his father moved the family back to Mary's home valley, obtaining work at the paper mill in Lealholm and making a home at what would later be known as Poet's Cottage, though eventually Patrick left them to seek a better living, never to return. So bad was the family's poverty that when the young John began work in 1805 as a servant to a Lincolnshire gentleman, he needed Parish Relief to provide him with suitable clothes.

Within two years John was back in Eskdale, becoming a skilful journeyman mason and having a hand in building many properties and farm buildings which stand to this day. One example of his work, still admired by passers-by, is the useful and decorative direction sign at Stonegate which shows the mileages to Castleton and to Whitby, with carved pointing fingers. He left his mark on 'The Dancing Stone' in Danby Dale, which has his name carved into it with the later addition 'Neu hees dead' ('Now he's dead').

Having abandoned his family's Catholic faith John became a fervent Methodist, travelling extensively and

preaching. He was a natural storyteller and wrote hundreds of poems and songs, many in broad local dialect; in fact, he was often composing when quietly working. He would commit his ideas to paper and stuff these into his hat, which was often full by the end of the day. Some of his most enduring legacies though are the carved heads with which he adorned properties throughout the area, using his remarkable talent for creating recognisable likenesses of people he knew. Along with three heads on Lealholm chapel, which he helped to build in 1839, he created that of a young Queen Victoria at her coronation.

His work was published in 'Old Isaac, The Steeplechase and Other Poems' (1843) and 'The Bard of the Dales or Poems of Miscellaneous Pieces' (1850), both packed with poetry inspired by local people and events. The latter contained a glossary of the dialect words he used, useful for enabling the general reader to understand what can appear to be a foreign language!

Castillo died in 1845 and was interred in the Wesleyan Chapel burial ground at Pickering, where he had settled in later life. His poem 'Lines on Leaving Fryup, in Search of Work' demonstrates how it pained him to leave his beloved Eskdale, but we can see that he faced this major change with his customary optimism and cheerfulness:

*I'm sorry, Fryup! thee to leave,
But thou deniest what I crave,
Though I have ask'd with tears!
Oft I have drunk at thy pure rills,
And labour'd 'mongst thy
moorland hills,
For many toilsome years!*

*Here, with each morning's
early dawn,
I lov'd to walk the flowery lawn,
To hear thy warblers sing!
Or when at eve their
songs were mute,
I've sooth'd my fancy with my flute,
And made thy woodlands ring!*

*I've seen thy mountains
clad with snow,*

*While shelter'd in the vale below,
'Midst hospitable friends!
For all their kindnesses to me,
May Heav'n bless every family,
And make them full amends!*

*But trade is now so dull and dead,
A man can hardly earn his bread,
In winter's frost and snow:
So I must take my staff in hand,
And travel to some distant land,
Till here more plenty grow!*

*I grieve to leave the Sunday School,
Where I with gratitude of soul,
Have taught with great delight,
The youthful, rising sons of men,
To steer safe past the gulf of sin,
By glorious gospel light.*

*For quicksands and contrary winds,
And enemies as well as friends,
I still expect to find:
There is a Friend who lives above,
To all who do His precepts love,
He proves both true and kind!*

*To Him I will address my prayer;
My little bark unto His care,
With confidence I'll trust!
A steady course, O may I steer,
He'll land me safe at last!*

His headstone has survived and is preserved in a private garden. Although he roamed the moors and dales two centuries ago, we still have our reminders of this larger-than-life character.



Find out more

'Poems in the Yorkshire Dialect' by John Castillo, edited by George Markham Tweddell (1878), download or read online at [https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/Poems_in_the_North_Yorkshire_Dialect_by_John_Castillo_\(1878\)_edited_by_George_Markham_Tweddell](https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/Poems_in_the_North_Yorkshire_Dialect_by_John_Castillo_(1878)_edited_by_George_Markham_Tweddell)

The Dancing Stone in Danby Dale, above Botton, grid ref. NZ 701048.

Castillo's signpost with the pointing hand is on a roadside building at Stonegate, near Lealholm.



Road-sign carved by John Castillo, Stonegate



The River Esk, Lealholm



Modern tribute to Castillo, Lealholm



Sign near Castillo's former home, Lealholm