

OBJECTS OF LIFE

WITH SARA BASQUILL

'Poor old Joe' of Gainsborough

Several years ago, during a survey of the art store at the Museum of Lincolnshire Life, I stumbled upon an unusual portrait. Painted on a sheet of metal, the full length likeness showed an eccentric looking gentleman standing in a landscape comprising lake, hills and trees. Holding a stick and wearing a battered top hat decorated with foliage and a clay pipe, his shirt unbuttoned and one stocking tumbled to his ankle, his appearance was that of a vagrant. Intrigued I consulted the museum's catalogue and discovered the portrait (by an unknown artist) was of William Hornby, Gainsborough resident, banker and local entrepreneur. Could such an odd looking character have once been a high-flying businessman? The painting remained something of a mystery until 2016 when I received an email from Rosemary Speck, volunteer at Gainsborough Heritage Centre. The Museum of Lincolnshire Life's catalogue was now online and publicly accessible, and Rosemary had noticed the portrait had been incorrectly documented; the image was of Joseph Hornby, William's brother. In *Our Old Town* (1857) Thomas Miller's written description of Joseph corresponds with the painted portrait:

For years he had wandered about Our Old Town, with his darned hose ungartered, and hanging about his heels, the tie of his neckerchief sometimes under one ear, his waistcoat unbuttoned, and his crownless hat, worn the wrong side uppermost, and nothing between his grey pate and the sun and rain. If you said to him, 'Why do you wear your hat upside down?' he would reply, 'Because the world's upside down with poor Old Joe.'

Miller was a very young child when Joseph passed away and, writing

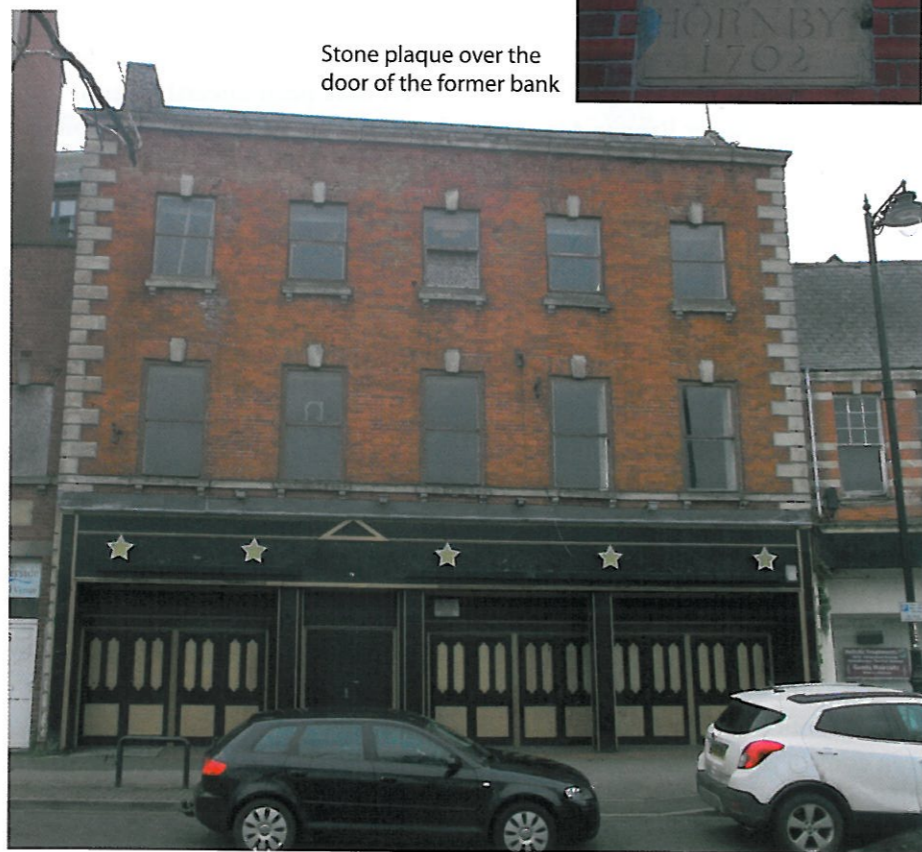


Hornby painting from the collection at Gainsborough Old Hall

over forty-five years later, may have formed his description of 'Old Joe' from oral accounts or familiarity with the portrait. This theory became more plausible when further research revealed the existence of three similar portraits (unsigned and undated) held in the collections of Gainsborough Old Hall, although the artistry is of a poorer quality than the example at the Museum of Lincolnshire Life and all have some minor differences in the background landscape. Gainsborough Heritage Centre has recently acquired a further example, which they hope to display, and also hold a late nineteenth century postcard version of one of the portraits in the Old Hall's collections. This, along with several published



Stone plaque over the door of the former bank



Former Gainsborough Bank building in Bridge Street

nineteenth century accounts of his life in local history books, suggests 'Old Joe' was a well-known and popular character, even many years after his death.

Joseph was baptised in Gainsborough Parish Church in November 1729. His father, also Joseph, was a mercer. According to local resident Charles Marham (interviewed by the *Gainsborough News* in March 1894), Joseph had always been a curious creature:

I can just remember old Joe Hornby. William and Joe Hornby were bankers. Joe was always eccentric. He was once dining at a gentleman's house in the days of his prosperity, when a plum pudding was put on the table, Joe was known to be very fond of plum pudding, but on this occasion the company were amazed when he took out of his cheek a quid of tobacco, laid it upon the pudding, and exclaimed 'Pudding, thou art mine.' He spoke the truth, for after Joe had marked the pudding for himself, no-one else wanted any. Some big bank failures in London brought about his downfall, and

I have seen old Joe Hornby sitting on a doorstep eating a raw red herring.

William Hornby was a partner in the bank of Hornby, Esdaile and Raynes, which opened in a building on Bridge Street in January 1791. The building was once William's home and a stone plaque, which reads 'I & W Hornby, 1762' can still be seen above the doorway. Hornby and Esdaile were made bankrupt in May 1803; meetings were held in the White Hart Inn on Lord Street to audit the accounts and pay creditors. It was said the bank's collapse was caused by the failure of a London bank, which Hornby and Esdaile were involved in, and it brought a great loss to many people including Joseph. Miller claims that after the bankruptcy Joseph lost everything to his creditors, including the gold mourning ring he wore in memory of his young wife, and he 'never looked up afterwards...' (*This Old Town*, 1857).

William died in poverty in Doncaster in 1805. Joseph, who had once lived in a grand house in the Market Place, was cared for by an elderly lady who was once his cook in more prosperous

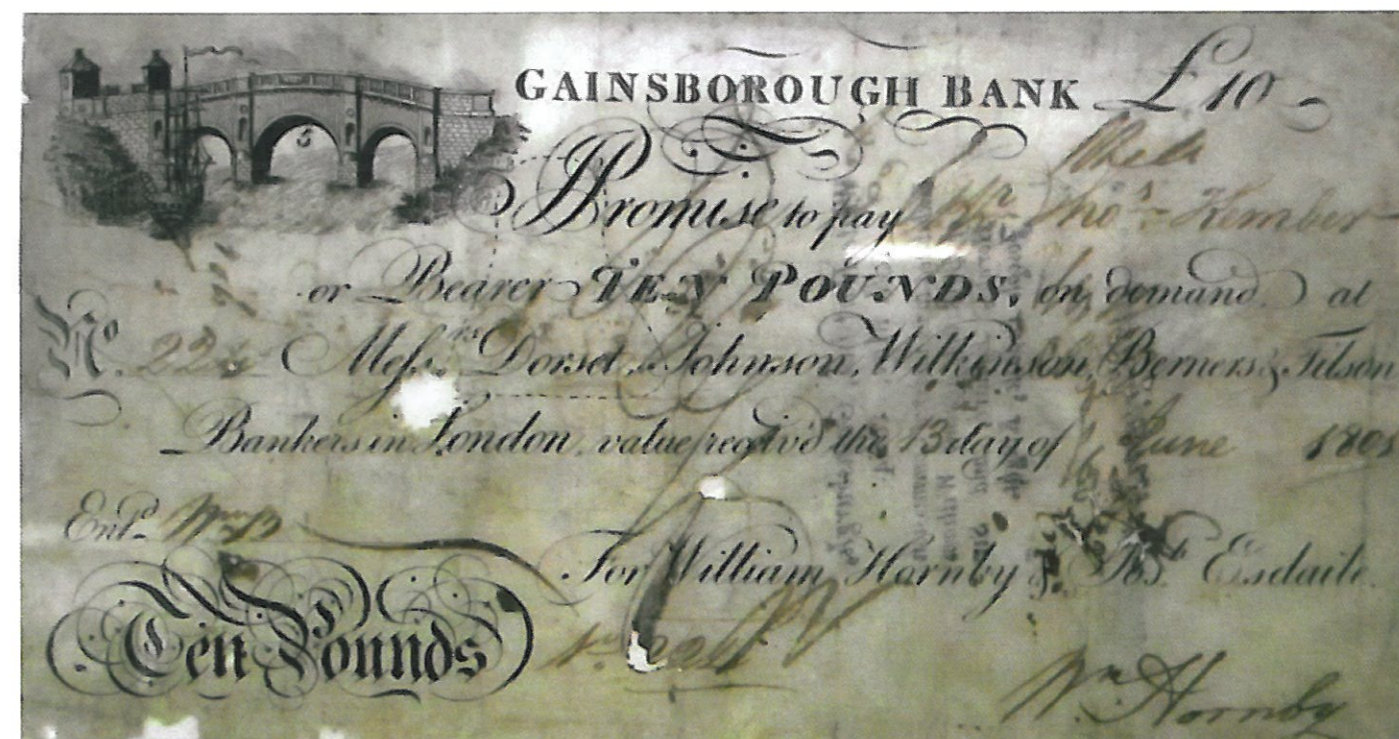


Hornby painting from the collection at Gainsborough Old Hall, also printed on a postcard

times. He died in July 1811 and was buried in the Parish Church in the town where he was so celebrated.

(Lincolnshire County Council's online cultural collections database *Lincs to the Past* can be accessed at www.lincstothepast.com

With thanks to Rosemary Speck of Gainsborough Heritage Centre.



Gainsborough Bank £10 note, dated 13 June 1801, with an image of the Toll Bridge and Hornby's signature

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