

The High Master and Little Billy Clough

by John Waddington-Feather

There's no doubt about it. It's his flat, short vowels and clean-cut consonants which mark out a Yorkshireman from his fellow Brits. The forebears of present-day Yorkshiremen may have come from anywhere in the world: Africa, Asia or Europe, and he may have skin of any colour, but he'll still speak with the pronounced accent of the Anglo-Norse settlers who laid down West Yorkshire's dialects centuries ago.

Of course, they didn't all speak the same dialect throughout Yorkshire. The dialects of the farmlands in the North and East of the county are derived from the Angle and Danish-Viking settlers, who came direct from North Germany and Denmark from the sixth to the eleventh centuries. But the dialects of the industrial West are derived from the Angle and Norse-Viking traders, who came from North Germany and Norway via Ireland, also from the sixth to the eleventh centuries; and that same instinct for trade is there still. There's a potential tycoon in every Yorkshireman.

Keighworth produced several tycoons in the explosion of industry in the town in the 19th century. It was still producing them in the 20th when Clifford Clough made his millions in the wool trade. Clifford was a short, stocky man, bluff and very sure of himself, yet canny. No one pulled the wool over Clifford's eyes – not even his fellow wool merchants. He was down-to-earth and as hard-headed as they come. There was no lah-di-dah about Clifford Clough, no edge, no finesse. He was a West Yorkshire man of trade through and through.

He'd had the usual education at a Council School; starting and going right through the same school to the senior department before he left at 14. He had a sound education there and learned the basics of his engineering trade before he left. But he knew little about the arts, literature and all that, though he enjoyed brass band music and always went to the annual performance of "Messiah" in Keighworth.

When he left school he went straight into the mill as an apprentice mechanic and learned what made the textile trade tick on the factory floor. It wasn't long before he was made manager and as manager grasped the essentials of finance and banking. By the time he was thirty he had his own small mill. At forty he had four

mills and was a millionaire and a good catch in marriage. He married another mill tycoon's daughter, Edna Shackleton, who produced their only child, Billy.

Now Edna had been brought up very differently from Clifford. Her parents may have come up through the ranks like Clifford Clough, but she'd been packed off to prep school at an early age and then to a finishing school in Switzerland. As a result, she became upper-crustian and there was no trace of a Yorkshire accent in her speech. In brief, she spoke posh.

However, as little Billy grew up he modelled himself on his dad and spoke 'broad'. It didn't bother Clifford one jot; in fact, he was rather proud that his son was growing up speaking broad Yorkshire. Yet his mother knew, in the wise way of all mothers, that if Billy was to get on in life he would have to speak well. All upper-crustians spoke well, from the royal family down. It was their Shibolet. You were pigeonholed in upper-crustian society by the way you spoke, where you'd been to school, which Lodge you belonged to and which college at Oxbridge you attended.

The South of England was very different from the North and once you left the North and went down South you were caught up in the Old Boy net. After numerous take-overs when the old family businesses disappeared, the Old Boy net crept North which was being filled by multi-national managers who spoke posh and came from abroad or down South.

The crunch came one lunch-time when young Billy arrived home from school and asked his mother: "What we bahn to hev for dinner, mam?" She realised then that something had to be done. Already several of her friends at coffee mornings had commented in their sly way how her son spoke. They'd passed it off as a joke but there was no escaping their sinister undertones. Edna had laughed it off, but she was irked. Upper and middle-crustian ladies in Yorkshire tried hard to iron out their Yorkshire accents from an early age, till their speech became a sort of mangled Yorkshire (for they could never get rid of the flat vowels) which came down the nose. Those like Edna who'd been away to school didn't have to try and spoke proper from the word go.

She nagged and nagged at Clifford till he gave in and they selected a top-drawer, public school down South. It had to be down South, because the lads who went to Northern public schools still spoke with a modified Yorkshire accent; not quite dialect but still markedly Northern. No, it had to be a school down South where they all spoke proper so that Billy would follow suit.

Now Edna had been at school in Switzerland with the wife of the High Master of a very select school in Berkshire, so she was able to pull strings and get Billy signed in there. Came Billy's twelfth birthday and Clifford took him down to meet the High Master. It was the first time away from home and Billy was very apprehensive; but he'd enough of his dad in him to carry it off and he settled in nicely.

Clifford stressed to the High Master that he was sending his son to have his accent ironed out and taught to speak proper. The High Master, a tall, polished man with a cut-glass voice, who could well have been an ambassador, gave a thin smile and said: "Actually, we pride ourselves here on how our boys speak. We're very strong on drama and the boys practise public-speaking and debating all the way up the school. After all," he added with a smug smile, "many of them go into the City when they leave, and Parliament. Indeed, there are several in the Cabinet at present." And he went on to name them.

At the end of term Clifford went to pick up his son for the holidays. He was met again by the High Master who was asked how Billy was faring with his speech.

"Reight grand!" said the High Master. "It were 'ard work at first, but in t'end we've gotten him speyking just like us."

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