

George Lipscombe's visit to Axminster, 1799

Introduction

By the end of the 18th century travel writing was becoming increasingly popular, and in 1799 George Lipscombe (1773 to 1846), described as a physician and antiquarian, published 'A Journey into Cornwall through the counties of Southampton, Wilts, Dorset, Somerset and Devon'. The full text can be accessed on-line via google books.

Lipscombe's comments on the town should be read in the knowledge that he visited some decades before the major fire which cleared the centre of the town, allowing Trinity Square to be established in its current form. We also know (from Vancouver, 1808) that some improvement works were carried out in the Church in about 1805.

His book was met by mixed reviews. Some commended his style and the forthright nature of his comments. Others clearly found his whole approach objectionable, and his candour excessive. He was still in his 20s when he wrote this book, which one review says started as a series of letters, which were subsequently consolidated into a book.

Lipscombe's description of Axminster

He approached Axminster from Chard. At the end of Chapter XIII he writes as follows.

"The Church of Axminster presents itself to your view, when at the distance of about two miles from the town. You now meet with several branches of the river Ax, one of which is so rapid as to turn a mill."

"There is a small neat habitation of white stone chequered with flints, upon an eminence to the right, before you enter the town, called Clocum."

Chapter XIV starts with his account of Axminster, where he dined at the George inn. Although he does not name the George in this chapter, he returned for a second visit on his way home, and on that occasion (in Chapter XXXV) named it. He writes as follows (in Chapter XIV).

"Axminster is a most miserable town. The houses are extremely mean, and many of them covered with thatch. They are in general built with a rugged kind of stone, produced every where in this part of the country."

"The Church stands in the middle of the town, and is an irregular building of some antiquity, as appears by the entrance on the south side, which is under a saxon arch, now, in no good condition."

"The building has suffered considerably since it's (sic) first erection. There is at present one aisle attached to the north side, with a parapet highly ornamented: but the saxon arch above-mentioned opens immediately into the body of the Church; there being no aisle on that side."

"There is a gravel walk with some rows of elms around the church-yard, which would have a pleasing effect if it were not cooped up in an enclosure of the most shabby houses I ever saw."

“All the streets are narrow, crooked, and in the highest degree inconvenient and disgusting: there is, indeed a most excellent Inn, at which, with the best provisions the county affords, the traveller may console himself, for the scarcity of objects without doors, deserving his curiosity or attention.”

“Here, we had a good dinner and a handsome desert, and first tasted the luxury of the west called clotted cream, which is always served up with their tarts. This delicacy is made by scalding the whole of the milk as it is drawn from the cow, and then exposed to the air for several hours. I must not omit to mention the carpet manufactory, which is certainly worth seeing; and this branch is brought to great perfection, that the carpets made here, are equally durable and elegant as the Turkey carpets imported.”

“We saw several, under the hands of different Labourers, the colours of which were wonderfully clear and beautiful: the price varies from thirteen shillings to twenty-five and upwards, per yard. The persons employed are Women and Children, and it is really astonishing to see with how much facility the latter are brought to the knowledge of this kind of work, by which so many are enabled to earn their bread, who would not otherwise be capable of contributing in any degree, towards their own maintenance and support.”