

JAMES ABREE, PRINTER AND BOOKSELLER, OF CANTERBURY.

TOWARDS the close of the seventeenth century, the long series of restrictive Acts that had cramped the printing trade for nearly two centuries came to an end.

Under them, no printer was allowed to carry on his trade in any other place than the City of London, the City of York, and the two Universities; but now they could set up where they liked, and by the year 1750 there was hardly a town of any note in England that had not its printer. The immediate result was to bring these hitherto secluded places into closer touch with the world around them, for almost the first thing the newly-established printer did was to print a newspaper. On the other hand, the coming of these printers was not welcomed by the legitimate bookseller, who, perhaps, had been established for some years, and had practically a monopoly of the bookselling business, for another thing that the newcomer did almost immediately was to join the trades of bookseller and stationer to that of printing, thus setting up a very serious competition to the older firms.

Despite its importance as the seat of an Archbishop, Canterbury, which had possessed a printing

press in the sixteenth century, did not set up another until 1717. Even in 1717 the establishment of a printing press in the city was a speculation. What led James Abree's steps to Canterbury, we have no means of knowing. Soon after his arrival, he printed a sheet containing the names of the mayor, aldermen, and common council of the city who had encouraged 'the revival of printing'; but if any of them did so, it was privately and not publicly, for the records of the city are silent on the matter. I am rather inclined to put the printing of that sheet down to a piece of advertising on the part of the printer.

Abree was a shrewd man of business, and he did not begin his career in Canterbury by taking expensive premises in the High Street, the Mercery, or the Butter-Market, but set up his printing office in one of the narrow ways that led to the Castle—in his own words, 'over against the "Three Tuns," in Saint Margaret's Parish.' No such house as the 'Three Tuns' now exists in Canterbury, but there is little doubt that it is to be identified as the 'Queen's Arms,' which stands at the corner of Watling Street and Castle Street, and Abree's office and shop were somewhere at the corner where Margaret Street, Castle Street and Beer Cart Lane now meet.

James Abree's first work was the establishment of a newspaper which he called 'The Kentish Post, or Canterbury News Letter.' In form, it was a small folio sheet of four pages, printed in double columns, and it was issued twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, the first number

bearing the date 1717. At one period, for a short time, the front page had a large woodcut view of the City of Canterbury, which is quite interesting in these days; but for some reason it was discarded after a few months' use. The character of this newspaper will be readily understood when it is said that with the exception of about four inches of space at the bottom of the last column, it consisted entirely of abstracts from the chief London journals of that time, the remainder being allotted to what James Abree considered to be interesting local news. But he might as well have been living in Timbuctoo for all the notice he took of what went on in Canterbury, and it frequently happened that several issues were published in succession without a single line of Kentish news, while it is quite possible that for what he did insert he was indebted to the London press.

The chief items of local news found in the 'Kentish Post' consist of the names of persons tried at the assizes, or executed on Pennenden Heath, an occasional account of a highway robbery on the Kentish roads, or the arrival or departure of troops from the garrison, and the annual election of the mayor and aldermen. Births, deaths and marriages were left unrecorded unless they had previously received notice in the London press, or unless they touched some very rich Kentish family, while the everyday life of the City of Canterbury was totally ignored.

But, though the 'Kentish Post' furnished so little Kentish news, it contained a great many Kentish advertisements, which were sandwiched in between

the various London extracts. Advertisements of lost property, strayed animals, land, houses, and businesses for sale, tradesmen's advertisements, theatrical advertisements, advertisements of cock-fights, boxing matches, horse racing, and sales of books, forming a useful mirror of the social life of the period, and extremely valuable as records of names and places in the county of Kent and City of Canterbury which it would be most difficult to trace in any other way.

The price of this sheet was twopence, one half-penny of which was for payment of the stamp duty.

Copies of the early numbers of the 'Kentish Post' are rare. The British Museum possesses nothing before 1729, and the Beane Institute at Canterbury does not possess a single copy of it. Its success was immediate, its circulation steadily rose, and Abree had his own staff of newsmen who distributed it throughout the country.

This bi-weekly publication gave Abree's workmen constant employment, and when to this is added the ordinary work of a jobbing office, the printing of cards, head-bills, and advertisements, there could not have been many days when his press or presses were idle. In course of time he began to print books, for the most part sermons preached either at the Cathedral or in one or other of the numerous churches and chapels with which Canterbury abounds. Amongst those of a different character was a volume by a local poetess entitled, 'Poems on Several Occasions. Canterbury: Printed by J. Abree, MDCCXL, 8vo'; and to this was

prefixed an interesting list of subscribers, the bulk of whom were Kentish people.

As a printer, James Abree was no better and no worse than most of his contemporaries. At the time he set up business most of the printers in this country used type purchased in Holland, and there is no doubt that Abree's office was stocked from that source. He had no great variety of sorts, and his ornaments and initials were of little merit; but his presswork was clean and fairly correct.

Abree was not only a printer: he was also a bookseller and stationer, and this branch of his work is quite as interesting as that of his printing office.

From very early times booksellers seem to have been chosen by their patrons as the proper persons to take care of letters, or to whom might be entrusted the buying of cravats and stockings, or any other articles they required. This, perhaps, arose from the fact that haberdashers and drapers often added bookselling to their legitimate trade, and in its turn explains why, in the eighteenth century, booksellers and stationers are found selling wall-papers and patent medicines. At James Abree's shop could be had all the ordinary stationery ware, such as writing-paper, sealing-wax, pens of all kinds, ink, pocket-books, note-books, playing-cards and almanacs, and also paper for covering walls.

With regard to this latter article, I find the following entries in an old account-book, kept by a resident in Canterbury:—‘Paid James Abree for four pieces of green ground paper for hanging

rooms. 16s.' 'Paid James Abree for six doz: paper borders for my chamber and the Gallery room at 9d. 4s. 6d.'

Patent medicines of every kind were to be had at Abree's printing-house. 'Squire's Genuine Grand Elixir' was warranted to cure all the ills under the sun. The famous 'Plaister for the Stomach' was the specific cure for ague. Dr. Daffy's 'Original and Famous Cordial' was a very old prescription, and was said to have preserved hundreds of families during the great plague of 1665. Dr. Chamberlain's 'Anodyne Necklace' also claimed to be a preservative against disease, and had an immense sale.

In addition to these Abree was agent for Dr. Eaton's 'Styptick for stopping bleeding,' Crawley's 'Pectoral lozenges' for coughs and colds, 'The True spirits of Scurvy Grass Drops,' and a host of others that he freely advertised in the 'Kentish Post.'

His stock of books was a large one, though perhaps he did not lay himself out for a very high-class trade in this respect. Books on every subject filled his shelves; but they were chiefly low-priced books of a popular character. In the booksellers' shops of a cathedral city works on divinity would naturally form the bulk of the stock. Abree laid in large numbers of Bibles, Prayer and hymn-books of all sizes, and no doubt did a large trade in them, as well as in sermons and controversial works. Works on agriculture and housekeeping, school-books, plays, all had a ready sale; but above and beyond all in popularity were the badly printed

and badly illustrated chap-books, the garlands of songs, the tales of Robin Hood and Little John, 'The true and genuine account of the many robberies committed by William Hook,' the love story of Romeo and Juliet, all to be had for a few pence. Another class of work in which Abree dealt largely was that issued in weekly and monthly parts, 'number-books,' as Charles Knight called them. This form of publication seems to have come into vogue about the beginning of the eighteenth century, and James Abree was agent for several London firms who issued such books. Amongst these may be noticed Jacob Hooper's 'Impartial History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England,' published in 1738. According to the advertisement printed in the 'Kentish Post,' the book was to be a small folio, printed in a neat roman letter, three sheets were to be issued every Monday for threepence, and the whole work was to be completed in fourteen calendar months; but if it exceeded that time the remaining parts of the History were to be issued to subscribers free of charge. The work was to be illustrated by twenty-six 'curious cuts,' by the best engravers of the day, and whenever an illustration was delivered, only two sheets of letterpress instead of three accompanied it.

A copy of this book is now in the British Museum, and appears to fulfil the promises held out in the advertisement. It is a small folio of one hundred and fifty-seven sheets and twenty-six full-page illustrations, and the imprint on the title-page runs, 'London: Printed and sold by all the

booksellers in Town and Country.' The cost to the subscriber of this work was fifteen shillings and threepence for a folio volume of upwards of six hundred pages. Another book of this class which Abree advertised was entitled, 'The Beauties of the English Stage, or the Select Dramatick works of the Learned,' and the conditions of issue in this case were that thirty-six pages of letterpress were to be delivered every week for twopence. It was estimated that fourteen or fifteen parts, comprising two comedies and two tragedies, would complete a volume, and would work out at fourpence-halfpenny or fivepence per play. It is not clear how the publishers arrived at this result, and unfortunately no copy of the work can be traced in order to verify it.

These parts were carried by Abree's 'newsmen' when they went their rounds with the 'Kentish Post,' as well as a store of ballads and chap-books for lighter reading. There must have been large numbers of these chapmen and newsmen on the roads during the eighteenth century. The London Bridge booksellers, for example, had a small army of 'chapmen' at work for them, and if we add to those the agents of other London firms, and to them again the representatives of the numerous booksellers throughout the country, it is evident that few days could have passed without a visit from one or other of these purveyors of literature.

But to return to James Abree's shop. In addition to books and stationery, he, in common with all booksellers, dealt in prints and maps; and no doubt portraits of famous divines and bishops,

as well as such views of Canterbury and its cathedral as then existed, adorned his windows or hung in his doorway, and attracted the curiosity and frequently the custom of the passer-by.

In 1768 a rival newspaper, called the 'Kentish Gazette,' was started in the city by another printer, James Simmons. Abree had taken into partnership some four years previously George Kirkby, the son of a Canterbury parson, and in this year 1768 he retired from business. His farewell letter to his customers is worth quoting :

Friends,—Having lately made known, by a public advertisement in this Paper, that I had entered into Articles of Agreement to resign my business in Favour of Mr. George Kirkby, Printer, Son of the Rev. Mr. Kirkby, deceased, formerly of this City: I think it my duty to inform you, that the Time of such my Resignation is now fix'd, and that the same will take place upon Midsummer Day the 24th of next Month.

In the meantime permit me to confess, that my Obligations to you are very many and very great: that I shall retain a just sense of them as long as I live; and as I was ever studious to merit your approbation, so has Success attended my Labours, and so shall I continue to enjoy every pleasing satisfaction that the Mind of Man can reasonably wish for, or expect.

Under the Influence of such grateful Impressions it is, that I resign my public Business for Retirement, with all due Acknowledgment and Thanks for the many and repeated Favours wherewith you have been pleased, for more than Fifty years past, to honour me, the first Printer and Publisher of *The Kentish Post*, or, *Canterbury News Letter*.

And once more may I be permitted to address the Public in general, and all my particular Friends, for the

Continuance of their Favours to the said Mr. George Kirkby, a young man in every respect qualified to succeed to my Business, who has for more than Four Years past shared in the management of it to my entire Satisfaction ; and is capable of carrying on and improving the same, as he has had every Advantage of Improvement by a seven Years Apprenticeship under that eminent Printer Mr. Bettenham of London.

All this I think myself obliged in Justice and Regard to say of Mr. Kirkby, as I have so long experienced his Capacity, Sobriety, Diligence and Fidelity ; and I make no doubt of his carrying into Execution the well-concerted Plan that he has lately offered for the Consideration of the Public.

I shall beg Leave to conclude with an earnest Recommendation of my Successor, *Mr. Kirkby*, to the Favours of the Public, and of all my particular Friends, sincerely wishing him that Countenance and Encouragement from them, which his Capacity and Merits do so justly intitle him to.

I am, and ever shall be,
With the greatest Truth and Respect,
Your most obliged humble Servant,
JAMES ABREE.

George Kirkby, on his part, promised to continue the publication of the 'Kentish Post.' In the issue of 2nd May, 1768, he assured the public that it would be dispersed in the usual manner by the news-carriers every Wednesday and Saturday ; and in that of 7th May he declared his intention of printing it for the future on better paper and with new type, while it would be enlarged and many new features introduced. He mentions that he had been approached by the printer of the 'Kentish Gazette' with an offer of a partnership, which he

refused at that time. But, as a matter of fact, George Kirkby was no sooner in possession of the 'Kentish Post' than he accepted James Simmons's offer, and in the issue of 20th July, the eighth number after it passed into his hands, he inserted the following advertisement :

To our Respectable Friends the Public.

Sensible of *our* Dependance on your Favor and impell'd by the principle of Gratitude for the friendly assistance we have *separately* received by your kind Encouragement, and happy in having now the Pleasure of declaring that, agreeable to your general opinion of the utility of *one Paper*, a Partnership will immediately take place, and that on *Saturday next*, *The Kentish Gazette, or Canterbury Chronicle* will be published under the joint direction of Kirkby and Simmons, and regularly continued as usual.

and thus, after an existence of more than half a century, 'The Kentish Post and Canterbury News Letter' was swallowed by its rival.

James Abree did not live long after his retirement, as he died on 20th August, 1768, aged 77. Administration of his effects being granted to a married daughter.

HENRY R. PLOMER.