

The Dixon Family: Boatmen to Butchers

First Generation

Luke Dixon was born about 1780 in Doncaster, Yorkshire, England; his baptism is recorded on 4th March 1780 at St George's Anglican Church, Doncaster. In the baptism record, his father is described as a "waterman." Luke died in Kingston-Upon-Hull (Hull), Yorkshire, on 19 March 1841. Luke married Hannah Drust on 30 June 1800 in Winteringham, Lincolnshire, England. Hannah Drust was born in Winteringham in about 1776. At the time of her Baptism, on 8 March 1776, she was recorded as Hannah Thrush. Hannah died in Hull on 26 July 1848.

Following the rivers

Doncaster, Yorkshire, Luke's birthplace, has a rich history. The Romans built a fort and accompanying habitation here, on the side of River Don, sometime between AD40 and AD71. The Romans also built a road from London to York (their regional capitals) that passed through the center of Doncaster, which was later extended to Edinburgh, Scotland. This road has been in continuous use since then, known as the Great North Road, until it was redeveloped for motor transport in 1921 and became the A1, the UK's first motorway.

Doncaster was a moderately sized town in the early 19th century. By 1811 Doncaster had a population of 6,935 and was described as having "...fine inland navigation" and "...deriving considerable advantage from the never ceasing intercourse kept up on this road [Great North Road]." This was an ideal place for a waterman to ply his trade, being on the main north/south road in England and with river access to the major ports on the east coast. Large amounts of goods and people traveled up and down the Great North Road by carriage, and those goods and people were also moved to and from the East Coast port and river towns by the watermen. Doncaster, in some ways, in 1800, was like a modern-day transport hub, and it was to remain this way until the middle of the 19th century when the modern railway system came to the area. Around this time, boats left Doncaster daily to Hull, other ports, and many harbors in between.

Sprotborough Lock, near Doncaster



Doncaster Boatmen. Vintage postcard. Author's collection

It was likely that as a boy, Luke, and his brothers, William, Thomas, and John, helped his father aboard their boat. As the boys grew up, William would remain behind in Doncaster, working as a waterman, until his death in 1842. Thomas made his way to Hull, where Luke would eventually join him. Records indicate that John died in Hull, aged 15, possibly during a boat trip from Doncaster, and was buried at the Holy Trinity Church on 7th May 1805. At a time when most people were born, worked, and died in the same town or

village, watermen had an almost unique range of travel. Many watermen lived with their families

on their boats, leading to a somewhat nomadic lifestyle. Luke probably met his future wife, Hannah Drust, on these travels, in Winteringham, Lincolnshire.

The village of Winteringham is on the south bank of the River Humber. The Humber is one of the major rivers in England, being 40 miles long and 7 miles wide where it meets the North Sea; the county of Lincolnshire is to the south of the river, and Yorkshire is to the north. At Winteringham, the river is one and a half miles wide and has been a crossing point since Roman times despite the fast tides and large sandbanks. This crossing point would have been well known to the area's watermen. On the north side of the river, slightly to the east, is the major port city of Hull. Boats from Doncaster to Hull would pass Winteringham on regular trips up and down the river. The journey to Hull from here by carriage is at least 40 miles around the riverbank, so the ferries have long been the preferred option for traveling from one side of the river to the other.

Like Luke, Hannah's younger brother John was a waterman who would later work with Luke on the Humber ferry. It is likely that this connection brought together the waterman, Luke, from Doncaster, with Hannah, his bride-to-be from Winteringham.

On the 18th and 25th of May and the 1st of June 1800, the curate of All Saints Church at Winteringham, The Reverend Lorenzo Grainger, published the Banns for the marriage of Luke Dixon and Hannah Drust. One month later, on 30 June 1800, Reverend Grainger married the couple.

Moving across the river

Luke continued his trade as a waterman from Winteringham, his occupation being noted on all the baptism parish records for his children. The curate of All Saints Church between 1799 and 1808, Lorenzo Grainger, is described as "*zealous, laborious and charitable*" by William Andrew of Winterton, a nearby village. In his work in the parish, Grainger left precise and meticulous records, noting parishioners' occupations and mother's names. He attempted to baptize every child as soon after birth as possible.

Grainer's attention to detail gives a clue to the lifestyle of Luke of his family when he records the birth of Luke's son, also called Luke, in 1805. In addition to recording Luke's birthdate of 8 February 1805 and a baptism date of the next day, 9 February, he also records that Luke's parents had "*removed*" from the parish instead of entering a date of a christening. Luke's brother James, born on 9 August 1808, was also baptized and not christened. This indicates that the family was back aboard their boat as soon as possible after birth and probably did not reside permanently in the village.

It was sometime between 1808 and 1813 that Luke moved from the south bank of the river to the north bank and based himself in Hull. It is likely that the move to Hull involved both a change to a more permanent location for him and his family and coincided with him working on the Hull to Barton horse-boat. The "horse-boat" was the local name of the sailing packet which delivered goods and passengers across the Humber.

Unfortunately, in 1813 Luke was listed as one of the 353 insolvent debtors locked up with “...desperate and turbulent characters” in York Castle debtors’ jail. The entry noting: “*Luke Dixon, formerly of Winteringham in the county of Lincoln and last of Hull in the East Riding of Yorkshire, mariner.*” was published in a list of prisoners in late 1813. There is no record of the nature of Luke’s debt, but unfortunately, debtors could typically remain in prison indefinitely until their debt was paid.

York Castle Prison is 40 miles north of Hull; a prison has been on the site since 1098, with harsh conditions. The prison had two floors, with the debtors above the felons, sleeping up to fifteen in a cell and surviving on the most meager provisions.

“The poorest of them would live on bread and water, sleep on bare boards, and wear nothing but rags in the unheated cells.” York Castle Prison, “*Life in Prison.*”

However, Luke was fortunate because, also in 1813, concern for the numbers and plight of debtors in prison led to an Act of the UK Parliament. The Insolvent Debtors (England) Act of 1813 allowed debtors to petition the court to be released after reaching an agreement to pay their creditors in installments in the future. Luke took advantage of this provision. His notice of the petition was lodged and published in the London Gazette, leading to his release in 1814.

In his book, *The Hero of the Humber* (1880), Henry Woodcock recounts an incident in 1820 that involved Luke Dixon and John Thrush, Luke’s brother-in-law. In the narration, John Ellerthorpe, and his father, also called John, owned a River Humber ferry that ran from Barton, on the south side, to Hessle, on the north shore. They were crossing the river at night in bad weather. Shortly into the journey, the elder John fell overboard and was left clinging to the boat. The younger John Ellerthorpe then swam back to the Waterside House, where they were with Luke Dixon and John Thrush earlier in the evening, to get their help. Henry Woodcock described Luke and John Thrush as “*the Hull horse-boatmen.*” Luke and John Thrush rushed to the scene and managed to get the elder John Ellerthorpe back into his boat. After having a glass of whiskey, courtesy of the landlord, the father and his son continued their journey, and I suspect that Luke and John Thrush returned to the inn to dry by the fire and with a tale to tell. John Thrush (subsequently Drust) remained with the Hull houseboat until his death in 1848, when his obituary notes that he had been with the horseboat for forty years. It is possible that Luke Dixon also stayed with the horse boat for the rest of his life too.

The Waterside House in Barton, built in 1715, remains today as a private residence. In 1820, it was an inn, and the Royal Mail coach ran daily from there to London. This was a place for the ferrymen and boatmen to meet their customers and get a meal and a drink.

Across from Barton, on the north bank of the River Humber, Hull is a medieval port city formed sometime in the late 12th century, about 20 miles inland from the North Sea with the River Hull to the east. Defensive walls were built in the 14th century to the north and west to create a walled city. Eventually, the town would break out of its old walled boundaries and expand to the north and west and across the River Hull to the east. Growing rapidly, Hull went from a population of 27,609 in 1801 to 46,426 in 1831.

Slowly docks were built along the old wall lines to the north and west, Humber Dock in 1807 and Princes Dock in 1829, turning the old town into a virtual island. This low-lying old town, boarded by two tidal rivers and large docks, was prone to flooding. The River Hull was heavily contaminated, and sewage would often back up into the town at high tide, adding misery to the already poor housing and lack of sanitation. Due to the poor living conditions, epidemics were common in these highly impoverished areas of the town. Cholera hit hard in 1832 and again in 1849. Typhus ravaged the city in 1847. *“Graveyards overflowed with the dead.”* Hull was regarded as one of the poorest of the ten largest cities in England, with heavy unemployment and famine.

It was into this poorest of poor cities that Luke, his brother-in-law John Thrush, and Thomas Dixon, his brother, and their families had relocated. All lived in the Blackfriargate area, just steps from the rivers and within 200 yards of each other. Luke and his family lived in a small alley called Malt Kiln Entry off Blackfriargate, which was literally the entrance to the Hull Malt Kilns. John Thrush and family were living in Blue Bell Yard, behind a pub backing onto the Malt Kilns, and Thomas Dixon was living with his family on Grimsby Lane, two streets away from John and Luke.



Ferry Pier, Hull. Vintage postcard. Author's collection

The Barton horse-boat that both Luke and John Thrush worked left once or twice a day (depending on the tide) from the New Ferry Pier on the confluence of the River Hull and River Humber at the end of Queen Street in Hull. Queen Street crossed Blackfriargate, so work was mere steps from their homes. The Humber Ferry ran from this point until June 1981, when the Humber Bridge was completed. In 1981 the Humber Bridge was the longest single-span suspension bridge in the world.

On 19 March 1841, at the age of 61, with a hard life behind him, Luke died and was buried at Holy Trinity Church on the 23rd. Hannah, his wife, died seven years later, on 26 July 1848. The address on her death certificate given is 2 Little Lane, Hull. Interestingly this narrow lane just off Blackfriargate was the last part of the medieval defenses of Hull to remain standing and was only demolished in 1960. Hannah was also buried in Holy Trinity Church.

Luke and Hannah Drust had five children; unfortunately, three died as infants. Hannah, born in 1801, only lived for 20 days. Luke was born in 1802 but died at the age of 2. They also named their next son Luke born in 1805. John was born in 1807 but only lived for two months. Their youngest child James was born in 1808. All the children were born in Winteringham.

Second Generation

Luke Dixon, son of Luke and Hannah, was born on 8 February 1805 in Winteringham, Lincolnshire; he died on 29 December 1837 in Goole, Yorkshire. He married Hannah Wray on 11 August 1823 at the Holy Trinity Church in Hull. Vital details for Hannah have been difficult to validate. Possibly she was born about 1800, making her about the same age as Luke. It is also likely that she died between June 1837 (the date of the baptism of her daughter Ann) and June 1841 (the date of the 1841 England census), as she does not appear in the census, nor can any records that can be positively linked to her after 1837.

Going to sea

Luke was less than ten years old when his family relocated from Winteringham to Hull. In the early 19th century, children as young as eight were put to work and the average age of child workers was ten. Luke and his brother James likely worked with their father on the ferry from an early age until they were old enough to work independently.



*Holy Trinity Church, Hull. The church used by the Dixons
Vintage postcard. Author's collection*

Leaving his father on the Hull horse-boat, Luke began working in his own right on the water, probably apprenticed at a young age to another ship. Spending all his life on boats and by the river, Luke built up enough experience and knowledge to be the master of his ship before his twentieth birthday. Luke became the master of the Humber Sloop *New Dove* as early as 28 March 1834 when it sailed between Hull and London.

The Humber sloops were hardy and efficient cargo coastal vessels with two sails, the main sail and a smaller triangular foresail, with a design dating back to the early 18th century. They were specifically designed for coastal and river transport. The *New Dove*, at 62 tons, was a smaller vessel designed for coastal and inland river work.

According to the muster rolls, the *New Dove*, with Luke as the master, spent 1835, 1836, and 1837 sailing cargo between London, Hull, and Goole. Luke typically had two crew onboard, a mate and a hand. In the days before rail, these were the long-haul truckers of their day.

On 21 December 1837, the *New Dove*, with Luke as the Master, was sailing from London to Goole when they ran into storm force gale. Humber sloops were sturdy vessels, but the storm was too much for them, and they had to put into the port of Great Yarmouth, halfway between London and Goole, after they lost their anchor and chains. Luke and the crew aboard the *New Dove* were lucky to ride out the storm; many ships and crews were lost along the east coast of England that night. After the storm had cleared, they continued their journey, and on 29 December, the *New Dove* made its way into the River Humber, heading towards the port of Goole. As they neared Goole, preparing to dock after a most challenging journey, further misfortune hit the crew; a swinging boom knocked Luke overboard.



*Working Ships, Tied up at Princes Dock, Hull.
Vintage postcard. Author's collection*

It was 7 p.m., dark and cold. Luke could not be rescued, nor was his body immediately located. It is unknown when his body was found, but it was not until March 1838, three months later, that he was buried at Holy Trinity Church in Hull. Interestingly, Luke's death was not registered until three months after his burial, on 7 June 1838, as informed by the local coroner, so somehow, he was buried without a certificate of death.

Luke and Hannah Wray had one son, Thomas born on 2 October 1825 in Hull, Yorkshire.

Third Generation

Thomas Dixon was born on 2 October 1825 in Hull, Yorkshire; he died on 15 May 1900 in Hull. He married Anne Rashell on 21 October 1846 in Hull. Anne Rashell was born in Cottingham, Yorkshire, in about 1824 and died on 22 September 1856. After Anne's death, Thomas married Elizabeth Leighton on 12 December 1860 in Hull. Elizabeth was born in South Cave, Yorkshire, in about 1831 and died on 17 January 1914 in Hull. Elizabeth had been married twice before her marriage to Thomas. First to Robert Anderson on 28 November 1849 in South Cave, a village just outside of Hull, and then to Gresham Brumby on 8 February 1858 in Hull.

Boats to butchers' shops

Hull is a port city, and Thomas lived in an area of town that was deeply engrained with sailing. His uncles lived nearby; they were sailors too. Sailors are a brotherhood, so undoubtedly, Thomas was surrounded by sailors for his birth. On the day that Thomas was baptized, 14 January 1829, three other sailors baptized their children that same day and at possibly the same service.

In 1837 when Thomas was only twelve, his father, Luke, died in a boat accident. It is possible that Thomas was aboard the boat when the accident occurred, as Luke was the captain, and many sons followed their fathers to sea.

In May 1839, at the age of 13, Thomas appeared as an indentured apprentice assigned to the ship *Thorp*. An indentured apprenticeship was an arrangement where a young boy was legally bound to a master for a period, usually seven years or until the boy reached 21. Given his background and family ties to the sea, he may have volunteered as an apprentice. However, in 1835 a UK act of Parliament had come into force that allowed local parishes to bind destitute boys at least thirteen years old into the Merchant Navy. This act was often seen as a way for a parish to save money by sending their unwanted poor children into the merchant navy, where ships over 80 tons were bound to take at least one apprentice. By this time, Thomas's father had died and, as we have no date for his mother's death, perhaps she was dead too. As an orphan, he would have been a ward of the parish or local charity. So, it could be that Thomas was bound to the ship by his local parish council.

The ship, *Thorp*, that Thomas was bound to was a nearly twenty-year-old sailing brig that could carry 115 tons of cargo. The *Thorp* would have followed the same routes as his father's ship, the *New Dove*, along the Humber and the North Sea coastline. In 1839, when Thomas was indentured, it had a crew of six; Joseph Steel, the master, a mate, three seamen, and Thomas, the apprentice. Although a merchant navy apprentice might be a pair of hands, there was an obligation to the master to provide for the apprentice:

“... that the person to whom the boy was bound as an apprentice – be it the ship's Master or Owner – would “teach, learn and instruct,” or cause to be “taught, learned and instructed,” the apprentice in the “Art, Trade, or Business of a Mariner or Seaman ... in the best Way and Manner that he or they can; and shall and will find, provide, and allow unto the said Apprentice competent and sufficient Meat and Drink, Apparel, Lodging, Washing, Medicine, Medical and Surgical Aid and Advice, and all other things necessary and fit for an Apprentice”.

In 1846 Thomas married Ann Rashell. On the marriage record, his profession is a mariner, and he now lives in Osbourne Street, Hull. Osbourne Street is outside of the Old Town area, slightly further away from the docks. These newly developed areas, away from the filth and flooding of the Old Town, would have significantly improved living conditions for Thomas and his family. Thomas signed his marriage certificate with a strong hand, clearly literate, unlike his father and grandfather. Undoubtedly Thomas had access to education. Education and literacy of poor urban children in Victorian England had become more of a priority than in the past, and Hull was no different. Education of working-class children in Hull was driven locally by philanthropists, the church, and the local council, and by 1835 it was claimed that “... *there were 2,620 pupils taught by some 500 voluntary teachers in sixteen schools.*”

A year after the marriage, on 31 October 1847, Thomas and Ann welcomed a daughter, Sarah Ann. Two years later, on 29 October 1849, a son was born, who was named Luke after his grandfather.

An accident to Thomas's uncle James in 1850 brought home the inherent risk of working on ships, especially after the tragedy of Thomas's father's death in 1837. On 2 April 1850, James was found drowned in the mud near a jetty in Hull. His boat was “...*stoved-in and full of water*”. The inquest did not discover what had transpired other than James was not drunk and described him as a “*gold-duster*.” In the age of sail, as the large cargo ships approached the port, small sailboats, often richly decorated and referred to as gold-dusters, would sail out to meet them to

secure an agreement to provide services for the boating work between the incoming ship and the port.

In 1851 Thomas, Ann, Sarah Ann, and Luke were living in Porter Street, Hull. This was a solidly working-class area, their neighbors were a mix of mariners, policemen, and shopkeepers, and it was further away from the grime and poverty of the dock area. Tragically, in 1856 Thomas's wife Ann, aged 32, died of tuberculosis (TB). Unfortunately, tuberculosis was an epidemic at this time; the young were hit especially hard, and those under 34 years old being especially vulnerable. Between 1851 and 1910, four million died of TB in England, becoming so pale and thin that it was known as the "white death" or "great white plague."

Thomas still had to go to sea to earn a living, so his children, now without a mother, went to live with their maternal grandmother in Cottingham, a village on the outskirts of Hull. It was around this time that Thomas met Elizabeth Leighton, whose second husband, Gresham Brumby, had died of liver disease on February 16, 1859. As was often the case in Victorian England, without a social safety net, widows and widowers often remarried quickly to rebuild a family support structure.

It is impossible to say how Elizabeth and Thomas met. Before their marriage, Elizabeth lived on New George Street, Hull and Thomas lived on Porter Street, on opposite sides of the town. One possibility is that, at the time, Elizabeth's brother William was a pork butcher living on Osborne Street, close to where Thomas lived, and perhaps this was a shop he used. Coincidentally, before his death, Elizabeth's second husband, Gresham Brumby, was a pork butcher too. When Thomas married Elizabeth Leighton on December 12, 1860, Luke remained in Cottingham with his grandmother, and his sister Sarah Ann came back to Hull to live with her father and stepmother.

After the marriage, Thomas and Sarah Ann moved in with Elizabeth and her sons William and Henry at her number 16, New George Street, home. Evidently, he also took over Gresham's pork butcher shop at the same address, as the 1861 census, taken in April 1861, records Thomas's occupation as "pork butcher."

In this case, Thomas was a pork butcher for just a short time. By July 1861, with the birth of his and Elizabeth's first child, Charles Leighton (1861-1868), he is back at sea. They would have four more children: Ann (1863-1938), Mary Elizabeth (1865-1945), a son also called Charles Leighton (1870-1923), and Thomas Dixon (1875-1958).

Thomas would remain at sea until at least October 1875, when his occupation was still a "merchant seaman" on his eldest son Thomas's birth certificate.

Shortly after Thomas's birth in 1875, after almost 40 years as a seaman, Thomas, now a master mariner, returned to being a pork butcher at 111 Osborne Street. Eventually, the pork butcher business would be taken over by his youngest son Thomas whose birth coincided with this change of occupation. For the next twenty-five years, the elder Thomas ran the pork butchers shop, also selling pork-based baked goods such as sausage rolls and pork pies as all pork butchers did at the time.

On May 15, 1900, the older Thomas died, now a pork butcher rather than a mariner, at the butcher's shop at 111 Osborne Street. He was 74 years old. Elizabeth continued to live with her son at the butcher's shop. By March 1901, the business was successful enough to afford a children's nurse and a servant to live on the premises. In August 1901, Thomas junior placed an advertisement in the Hull Daily Mail to sell the butchers business on Osborne Street, describing it as "... one of the oldest-established Pork and Baking Businesses in Hull." The family then moved to 109 Adelaide Street. In March 1901, there was a pork butcher at this address run by Oliver Barrick. It is likely that Thomas junior bought out or took over this existing business. It was a large 10-room building with a built-in storefront, in which they let one of the rooms out to a boarder.

Postscript

In March 1916, the younger Thomas Dixon was enlisted into service for World War One at the age of 41; he saw service as a carrier pigeon handler in Royal Engineers until April 1919. This prompted the sale of his existing pork butcher's business at 109 Adelaide Street.

Sometime before November 1924, Thomas resumed his pork and bakery business, this time at 436 Hessle Road in Hull, where it would remain, selling pork products and baked goods. For a long time, well into the 1980s, a painted sign on the side of the shop proclaimed, "*Dixon Pork Butcher Est. 1875*" Although later owned by the Richardson family and no longer a pork butcher, this popular local bakery "...serving the best-buttered breadcakes in Hull" was still known as Dixon's Bakery until its closure in April 2020. It is a family business that can trace its roots back to 1875.



Dixon Pork Butcher Est.1875
Photographed mid 1980s



Dixon's Bakery, 436 Hessle Road, Hull as it looked in
2019. With the kind permission of the artist (Geoff
Stenhouse, Hull)