

THE HARSHAW DIARIES

BY TIM FERRISS

The Harshaw Diaries, which cover a period of nearly 30 years in the middle of the nineteenth century, were deposited in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in 1996. The diaries were largely the work of a farmer, James Harshaw (1797–1867) who lived all his life in the parish of Donaghmore, Co Down, but also contain occasional documents written by other family members.

While the existence of the diaries was known, their whereabouts, for most of the last century, was not. Rev J. Davison Cowan made use of the Diaries when researching his *History of Donaghmore*, which was published in 1914, but what became of them thereafter remained a mystery, until they were discovered during renovations to the Grove City Bank in Pennsylvania USA in the 1980's. Largely through the efforts of Marjorie Harshaw Robie, a descendant of James Harshaw, the diaries were returned to Ireland and presented to the Public Record Office in Belfast. While a great proportion of the content of the diaries relate to his own family and their affairs and to the repetitive farming cycle of sowing and harvesting, they also contain occasional interesting information about some of the important issues of the time, the Famine, emigration, political unrest, the religious revival movement and topics of more general interest.



James Harshaw

Who was James Harshaw?

In the diaries he records that his “... ancestors settled in North Armagh for a few years. William came and settled in Donaghmore and Andrew settled in Armagh.” James, the diarist, was a descendant of William of Donaghmore. His father, also called James, lived in the townland of Ringbane and it was there that James was born in 1797. His father died in 1822 and his mother in 1830. His father is described in his son’s diary as a “truly honest man”, in whom “... nature united all the placid elements that are calculated to adorn the character of a meek and humble Christian. Sincere piety towards his God and goodwill to his fellow creatures were the leading features of his life.”

In 1816, when he was 19 years old, James married Sarah Kidd of Kiddstown, Co. Down. Sarah was just 17. The young couple set up home in a neighbouring townland but in 1830, following the death of his older brother, James inherited the ancestral home and, with his wife and children, moved back to Ringbane to the house in which he had been born. He lived there for the rest of his life.

Altogether he and Sarah had 12 children, three of whom died in infancy. Hugh, their eldest son, died from epilepsy aged 28. The diary contains a moving account of his death. James junior, William and Samuel all emigrated to America, while Robert became a Presbyterian minister and served in Mountmellick, Queen’s County (Co Laois) for many years. Marie, John, Jane and Andrew all remained at home and married locally.

In the diaries, Sarah, James Harshaw’s wife, is referred to as ‘Dandy’ and his son Andrew, for some reason, is called *‘The Chieftain*. James’s youngest son Samuel Alexander, his father’s favourite, is called *‘Absalom’* throughout the diaries. I was told by John Harshaw, a direct descendant of James’s, that the eldest son in the Harshaw family was often called Hugh. He believes that this tradition goes back to Hugh Prunty, grandfather of the novelists Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë. Hugh Prunty was, at one time, hired by James Harshaw, grandfather of the diarist. One diary entry notes that Hugh Prunty “... passed through my grandfather’s service leaving no permanent record behind him.”

James Harshaw took an active interest in local affairs. He was a man often called upon to settle disputes and was regularly asked to draw up wills and entrusted with keeping important documents for neighbours. Several complete wills are recorded in the diaries. In July 1848 he was called upon to make a will for Hugh McKelvey and he records that he took it home and put “.. in the desk

for safekeeping” On 7 April 1856 he wrote, “*I was wakened out of my bed about 9 o'clock at night to see James McGaffin. Found James very poorly. Wrote his will. Davy Neal was risen out of bed about 12 o'clock to join Chieftain in witnessing his will.*” A few days later there is a record of James McGaffin's death and funeral and then he notes that he read the will (to McGaffin's family) and took an inventory of the ‘goods and chattels’ and divided the livestock between the McGaffin family members. The will of William Kidd contains the following, “... and respecting that woman in Armagh that people says I married, that they call Grimes, I allow her one shilling and no more; I allow Elizabeth Irvine, if she goes to America, Ten Pound; if she stays Five.”



The Harshaw Homestead at Ringbane

As a farmer, he was naturally very concerned with the weather and the diaries record the weather conditions nearly every day. On 14 February 1857 he wrote, “*This was a fine spring morning and a lovely day. The red-breast and the thrush was on the tree and everything indicated that this was Valentine's Day.*” There are a lot of comments on bird-life and nature generally - hearing the first cuckoo in spring or finding the first frogspawn. For example, on 28 March 1844 he recorded, “*I saw a bum bee in Annaghbane when I was at Sam Mulligan's funeral,*” and a year later on 7 April, “*...saw a bum bee fly about on my way to Davy Weir's funeral.*” He took a keen interest in swallows, annually recording the first sighting, and also when the last one left.

In the autumn of 1849, when two of his sons, James and William, were preparing to emigrate to America, he recorded sightings of swallows every day from mid-September till his sons departed on 10 October. On 13 October, he wrote, rather poignantly, “*no swallows... the swallows have gone with James and Willie.*” William and

James sailed from Warrenpoint on the sailing barque ‘Jennet’, and arrived in New York, after a voyage of 65 days. James records that, “*A letter arrived from James and Willie, dated New York Christmas Day 1849. The letter informed us that they were well; the city was large and dirty and that none of the people so pretty as Miss Jane.*” The ‘Miss Jane’ was their young sister.

As well as recording the emigration of his sons, the diaries illustrate the high level of emigration from the area at the time. There are numerous entries detailing the movement of individuals and whole families to America. Among those he records leaving are: Barney

Cooke and wife, William McVeigh and wife, Andrew McClelland and family, Thomas Clegg and wife, Mrs Dell and her son Samuel, Thomas Boyd and wife.

It was generally expected that those who emigrated at that time, rarely returned. This was not the case with James Harshaws' sons. Three years after leaving, Willie returned in August 1852. He stayed a month and then went back to America. This time he took the train from Poyntzpass to Belfast. He crossed to Scotland and sailed from Glasgow. The voyage this time lasted a mere 12 days illustrating the superiority of steam over sail. Willie returned again in 1864.

Donaghmore Presbyterian Church, of which he was an elder, was central to James's life. Every Sabbath was recorded and very often he recorded the text and what the sermon was about. He attended the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church every year up to 1865, often going to great trouble to get there. On several



John Harshaw's House at Ringbane

occasions he walked to Poyntzpass to get the train.

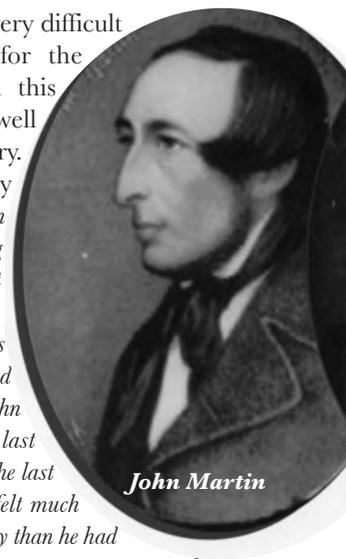
An interesting difference of opinion between James Harshaw and the then Minister, Mr Ross, occurred in April 1848. The subject was Infant Baptism. James was of the opinion that infants should be baptised in their parents' home. Mr Ross favoured Baptism in church and seems to have got his way. On April 16, 1848 Mr Ross's preached a sermon that included, "... *Baptism is not rightly administered unless administered in the Meeting House before the assembled congregation or when public worship has been announced and where the Minister presides.*"

The diaries refer to a series of *revival meetings*, which were held locally, and of the effects attendance had on some, who were said to have been '*impressed*' or overcome with fervour. On 13 September 1859 he wrote, "*Mr White preached. John Simpson was impressed. Anne impressed in her own house.*" Next day he visited them, "*John Simpson was in bed. He seemed very happy. I visited Anne and found her flushed and confused and in a religious state of mind....*"

James Harshaw's sister Jane had married Samuel Martin of Loughorne and lived within a short distance from her brother. Their son, John Martin, became a prominent member of the *Young Ireland* movement. He was a close friend, and later the brother-in-law, of John Mitchell, a leading Young Irelander and editor of '*The Nation*.' Mitchell was arrested in May 1848, and was transported for 14 years. The diary records that when John Martin returned from attending Mitchell's trial in Dublin, he and James Harshaw discussed the matter at great length. John Martin who became editor of '*The United Irishman*', soon became the subject of concern to the authorities himself. James Harshaw recorded that on 5 July 1848 "*...police searched for John Martin this night*". On 6 July, "*I was awakened at 4 o'clock to learn that a Police Captain and a number of policemen searched John Martin's house with a view*

to arresting him for sedition." On 8 July John Martin walked into Newgate and surrendered himself. He was arrested and charged.

This was obviously a very difficult and worrying time for the extended family and this anxiety is well documented in the diary. An entry on 11 July 1848 reads, "*In consequence of having heard yesterday evening that Mr Duffy (Gavin Duffy) of 'The Nation' was arrested and in Newgate and in the same room with John Martin, I slept sounder last night than I had done for the last five nights because John felt much more comfortable and happy than he had done...*" James Harshaw was eager and



anxious for news of how his nephew's trial was proceeding and the family got messages from Dublin as to how it was going. He records on 15 August, that "*John Martin's trial commenced yesterday morning*". Later, he wrote that the Martin family felt that the trial was going well as "*...Mr Butt had made out a good defence.*"

However, the next day James received a note from his son John,

"*informing me that Judge Piggott had charged against John Martin, which grieved me much.*" ('Judge' Piggott had, in his youth, been romantically involved with the novelist, Jane Austen.) Later that day, a second note came with the news that John Martin had been found guilty, with a recommendation to mercy, and that James Martin,

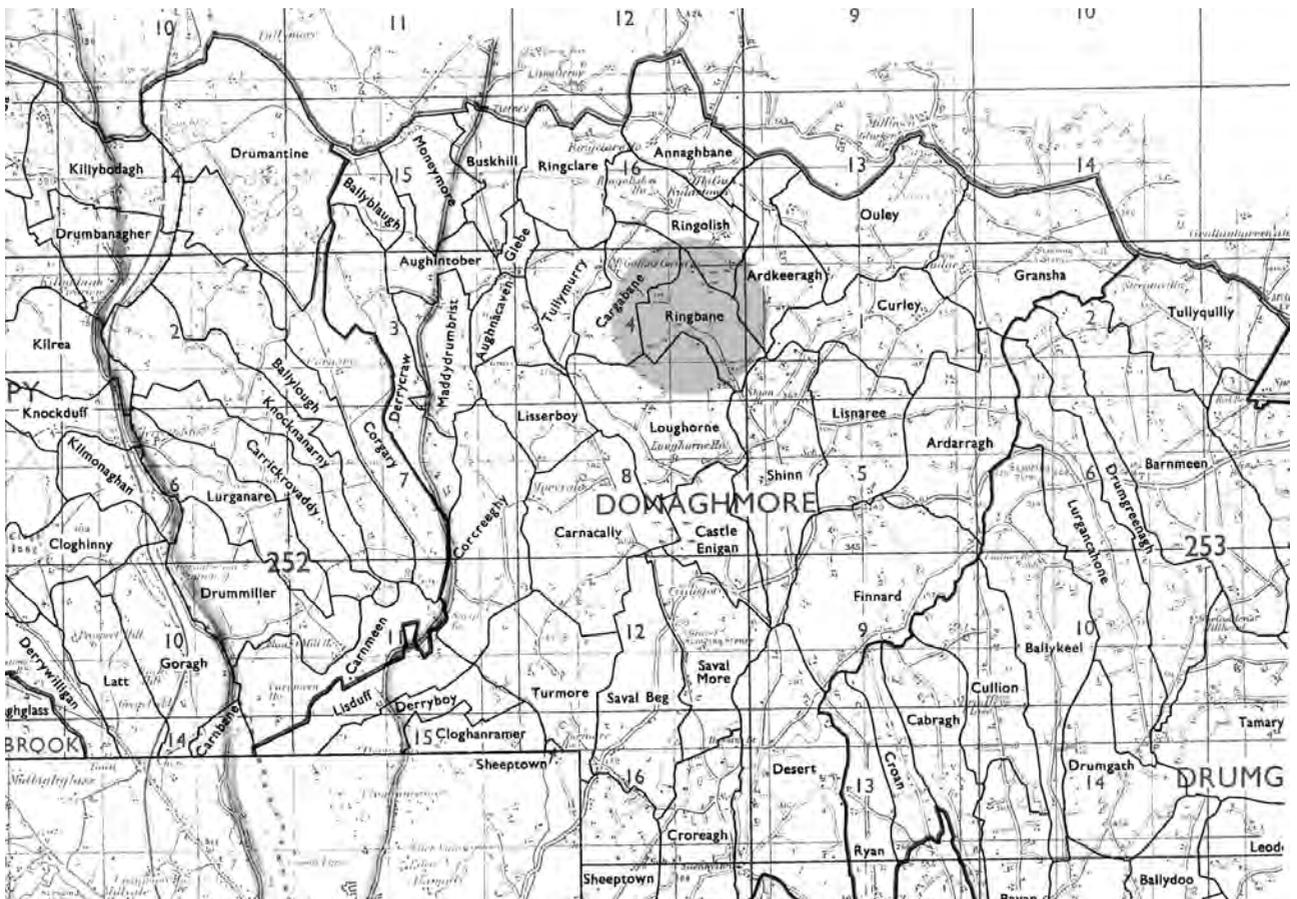
brother of John, had challenged the foreman of the jury to mortal combat. James Martin was arrested and lodged in jail. On 19 August, Judge Piggott sentenced John Martin to 10 years transportation.

James Harshaw was clearly very fond of his nephew and during Martin's transportation they kept up a correspondence. He records that he received several letters from John Martin and that he posted letters addressed to "John Martin, Hobart Town, Van Diemen's Land." John Martin eventually received a conditional pardon and was freed on condition that he didn't return to the United Kingdom. He lived in Paris for some time but in 1858 returned to Ireland in tragic circumstances. In October of that year his younger brother, Robert, and his wife Millicent, died within 9 days of one another leaving behind seven children all under 10 years old. John Martin came to Kilbroney and became their guardian, devoting the next ten years exclusively to their care. James Harshaw visited him there several times. (John Martin became MP for Meath in 1871 and on his death was succeeded by Charles Stewart Parnell).

members of the Donaghmore Presbyterian Congregation. There is a tradition that this unpleasantness led to James Harshaw leaving Donaghmore Congregation and joining that in nearby Glascar, where he was eventually buried. I can find no entry in the diaries referring to this and, as members of the Harshaw family had been buried in Glascar before James's time, there may be no real significance in the fact that he was buried there.



Donaghmore Presbyterian Church



Map of Donaghmore

James Harshaw appears to have agreed with John Martin's views and throughout the trial and thereafter, he steadfastly supported his nephew. This support appears to have made him unpopular with some

James Harshaw's high opinion of John Martin is echoed in a letter written by his son John Harshaw to an aunt in America, as the following extract shows, "Our friend John Martin... is now lying in Dublin under sentence of transportation

for ten years. He is the best man I know and perhaps ever will on this earth. He was too good to live among us. This country is therefore in a sad state. Nothing but beggars, liars, thieves and murderers in it."

Family affairs form a large part of the diaries. James was very close to his sister Jane, John Martin's mother. She lived nearby and visited or was visited almost daily. Her sudden death in 1847 came as a great blow to James. While it is not exactly stated, there is suggestion that she died of a fever contracted from her work helping the poor. She was in her normal good health on 30 June 1847, for an entry states, "*Jane here and breakfasted with my wife.*" However, a week later he refers to coming back, "*from the General Assembly in Belfast after 11 o'clock, visited my sister who is ill and got to bed about 12.*" He visited Jane again next day, and describes her as being "*moderately ill,*" but doesn't appear unduly concerned or alarmed. This had changed greatly by 16 July when he wrote, "*I visited her again and kissed her brow. Her breathing continues very calm and countenance very placid and mild. The last enemy seems near, very near, but disarmed of his usual terrors. Her lamp burns quietly out, like the sun in the western sky on a clear mild evening in the month of July. She entered into her rest about half past six this morning in the presence of all her children, myself and Dandy... On my way home at 8 o'clock I was forcibly struck by the thought that I had never travelled that way before without a sister. This reflection brought water to my eyes. I was consoled by the thought that she had entered into her rest, that she slept in Jesus and that to be with Christ was far better. John Martin closed her eyes. She sound sleeps now within the sleep of death and 'after life's fitful fever she sleeps well'."*

James's daughter Mary died in 1859 of scarletina following the birth of her baby. "*Dear Mary's remains were committed to the coffin about 10 o'clock and it was hermetically sealed.*" Mary's baby was christened James Alexander and lived with his grandparents, who were devoted to him. A wet-nurse is referred to as leaving when the child was 9 months old, "*15 May 1860, the nurse-girl left this place about 6 o'clock this evening. I handed her £4-4-0. She acknowledged herself paid for suckling James Alexander. Alex Douglas (the child's father) handed her a banknote by way of complement for her care and attention to his little son. She seemed very sorry at parting with the child and the family.*"

The youngest son Samuel 'Absalom' held a position with the Belfast Bank in the city and then for a while in the Portadown branch. However, on 14 September 1856, Samuel left for America. His leaving obviously greatly grieved his father for he continually refers back to the date of Samuel's departure as an epoch in his life. Every Sabbath thereafter is denoted as the "*... Sabbath since Absalom left.*" For example, Sunday 3 April 1859 is described as, "*The 133rd Sabbath since Absalom left.*" Like his brother Willie, Samuel also returned home, at least twice. James records on 17 July 1865, "*When at dinner, my youngest son Absalom came walking into the parlour.*" It is

thought that it was Samuel who eventually brought his father's diaries to America.

There is relatively little reference to the famine in the diaries. The appearance of the disease on the potatoes is recorded but he seems not to be greatly concerned. However he was clearly well aware of the distress among the poor of the area. In November 1846 he attended a meeting at which a committee was set up in Donaghmore to report on the state of the poor in each townland in the Parish. A month later, when a formal Relief Committee for the parish was established, under sanction from the Government, James Harshaw was appointed treasurer of this committee.

The death of his sister Jane Martin, as has been suggested, from fever contracted from helping the poor, clearly shows that there was 'famine fever' in the vicinity. This is illustrated in John Harshaw's letter, quoted from above. In 1849 he wrote, "*The fatal disease is very prevalent here at present and has been so especially in towns for some time past and I hope it shall not make an appearance in the country. Belfast appears to have suffered more from its ravages than any other town.... Robert is attending to his books and is going to Belfast College for the first this winter. He is there at present and my mother is uneasy about him as the cholera is raging there. She went to see him last week and it was the first time for her to see Belfast and to see a railway and she was well pleased with both and can tell a great deal about them.*" He also notes that his mother, "*.. got two new teeth and looks well...*"



The Manse

The need for a dispensary and a doctor was the subject of many meetings attended by James Harshaw. In May 1851 a resolution was passed stating that "*... the medical attendant shall not be required to dispense medicines to applicants known to be capable of paying for it or to persons behaving impertinently or using disrespectful and improper language towards him.*" Doctor Sanderson was elected to the position of The Dispensary Doctor in 1852 at a meeting held in Fourmile House. Dr Sanderson was already the Dispensary Doctor in Poyntzpass and he added Donaghmore to his practice. This connection has continued more or less to the present day. Dr

Sanderson's tenure was not without controversy. In September 1854, James Harshaw attended a meeting of The Poyntzpass and Donaghmore Dispensary Committee held in the Courthouse in Poyntzpass at which Dr Sanderson was reprimanded for being absent without leave. He apologised and was forgiven. In May 1857 at another meeting a Mr McClory charged Dr Sanderson with neglect of duty when he failed to visit Mr McClory's daughter, who had died. Again the doctor's apology was accepted. In February 1859, the doctor's request for an increase in his salary was refused but just two weeks later he was granted a rise from £60 to £80 per annum. Perhaps he had threatened to withdraw his services.

James Harshaw was again to the fore in the efforts to provide a manse for the minister and in June 1864 John Martin laid the foundation stone of the new building and made a speech. The occasion was spoiled as there was a torrential downpour. The first occupant of the new manse was Rev John Elliott. He, it was, who conducted worship in the kitchen on the day of James Harshaw's funeral and officiated at John Martin's funeral service in Donaghmore in 1875.



Glascar Presbyterian Church

James was keenly interested in astronomy recording faithfully the phases of the moon and observations of eclipses of the moon and sun. Some of his observations seem remarkably precise. On July 28, 1851 he noted that "... 82 hundredths of the sun was eclipsed by the moon on the sun's northern limb commencing at half-past-one and ending after three." He obviously had a lot of knowledge and a lot of interest in the subject. How he acquired this knowledge is not clear. While he was actively involved in local affairs, he was interested too, in the latest inventions. On 21 July 1849 he wrote that, "... in Dublin sat for my likeness to Gluckman in daguerreotype style." Then on 5 September 1856, he says, "Jane (his daughter) went with us to Portadown where we got our likenesses taken"

On 8 January 1866 the diary records, "between four and five o'clock this morning, my nose began to bleed profusely in bed. I became weak from loss of blood and could not express myself to my

friend Ralph Todd." Thereafter the diary entries become shorter and shorter.

In an essay included in the diaries, Andrew Harshaw,



Donaghmore National School

'The Chieftain', describes in moving terms his father's last days. It is entitled *A sketch of my father's last illness*: "Since the profuse bleeding he mentions under 8 January, my father never recovered his normal strength. He still walked about the farm daily with a shawl or cloak around his shoulders. He had been and was about the saving of some hay owing to the unfavourable season and was much out with the workmen about the harvest until 26 October 1866 when he was rising after a comfortable night's sleep. He was putting on him at 8 o'clock that morning as usual, but did not come down stairs. My mother began to wonder at his delay and when she went up found him shivering with cold and one of his socks in his hand. She and the servant girl dressed him and brought him down with some difficulty. He complained of a pain in his head and when he took some tea, vomited it up and seemed very weak and far from being well. He then wished to be taken out and James at one side and Jenny Bradford at the other assisted him through the big door to the road. He then returned without assistance, sat at the fire all day until he was taken up to bed about 7 o'clock by his sons James, John and Andrew. He was unable to put a foot under him and they had considerable difficulty getting him upstairs. My kind-hearted, generous, noble-minded father was never down the stairs after this. The family were all greatly alarmed and wrote to Robert to hasten down from Mountmellick and though the following Sabbath was the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper none of the family was out. Dr Sanderson and John Martin visited regularly. Neither of these men gave any hope of his ultimate recovery but said he might continue in the same feeble state for some weeks or months. A few nights I and more of the family sat up with him but afterwards Andrew slept with him. He would sit up for an hour or so once or twice each day at the fire in his own bedroom and Joe Duff shaved him regularly. He could converse clearly and intelligently on all matters mentioned to him though occasionally his mind wandered a little but, when spoken to, it recalled him to consciousness and intelligent conversation. He still ate a little on Sunday 27 and Monday 28 but the cough was breaking down what little strength remained. James sat up with him on Monday night and Andrew and he on Tuesday. John would often pray with him and read to him from the Bible, which he liked much to hear and when he could not speak on Tuesday it was quite evident that he heard what was being said. The last words he spoke were on Tuesday night in answer to a question he heard John read and he replied, "I do."



Church of Ireland Donaghmore

But owing to the quick and laboured breathing it was difficult for him to speak. Wednesday 30 January 1867, this morning showed plainly that my poor father had not held his ground during the night but was weaker and less conscious and that the rider on the pale horse was approaching. At 9 o'clock he was lifted up to have the bed made and a dry shirt put on but had to be held up in the chair. He couldn't swallow what was put in his mouth and so was soon put back in bed. There was no visible change until about 12 o'clock when it seemed so clearly to be fast drawing to a close. John and Robert read and prayed continuously through blinding tears. Absent members of the family began to arrive. They stood praying and weeping around his bed. James kept his hand on his pulse from 2 o'clock and told of the simple motion. The setting sun, which had been veiled all day, shone out brightly and kissed his noble brow. At 5 minutes past 4 o'clock, his pure, noble, generous, saintly spirit winged its flight to glory to bask forever in the realms of his Redeemer. He died without groan or struggle in peace in the presence of John, James, Samuel, James Alexander and all the members of the family."



American descendants of the Harshaw family including Karen Hickey, Marjorie Harshaw Robie, Suzanne Ballard and Sally Lowing



Pictured at James Harshaw's grave: Back (L to R) Mr & Mrs James Harshaw, J.B. Harshaw, William Harshaw, Archie Murdock (Son of Jane Harshaw) and Stanley Harshaw. Front (L to R) Mrs Murdock, Myrtle Harshaw, Jean Hillis and Jean Harshaw.

James Harshaw's funeral took place to Glascar Churchyard on Saturday 1 February 1867. James Harshaw was clearly an intelligent man. He was largely self-taught and, while sometimes his spelling is eccentric and his language quaint, he achieved a very impressive standard of literacy. He developed a fluent writing style, which was at times almost lyrical and could, as the occasion was appropriate, quote from the Bible or Shakespeare. While his farm was small by today's standards, he was comfortably off and was a keen observer of everything around him. He was obviously a very highly-respected and public-spirited man of great integrity, who was at the centre of a loving and caring family. His diaries will surely prove to be of great interest to anyone interested in the family history or in the local affairs of his time and place.



James Harshaw's grave at Glascar