

The Wold Cottage Meteorite

On 13th December, 1795 a 56 pound meteorite, the second largest recorded in England, landed about half a mile north of Wold Newton village, in a field near The Wold Cottage, at the time the home of a magistrate named Mr Edward Topham. Fortunately, the meteorite's passage and impact were observed and the statements of witnesses were taken on oath by Mr Topham. The loud explosion "alarmed the surrounding country and created so distinctly the sensation that something very singular had happened". That sensation was strongest of all for Mr Topham's shepherd, one John Shipley, who was within 150 yards of the spot and who was struck very forcibly by mud and earth as the meteorite plunged into the ground. It cut through a foot of soil and a further seven inches of chalky rock, creating a hole more than a yard in diameter and embedding itself firmly in the rock.

Numerous people saw and heard the meteorite hurtling through the clouds as it passed over the villages, but they were unable to identify what it was. Provincial newspapers carried eye-witness reports of the phenomenon. As the meteorite approached the earth two sons of the vicar of Wold Newton ran up to The Wold Cottage to investigate. Recording the incident, Mr Topham wrote: "All these witnesses who saw it fall, agree perfectly in their account of the manner of its fall, and that they saw a dark body passing through the air, and ultimately strike the ground: and though, from their situations and characters in life, they could have no possible object in detailing a false account of this transaction, I felt so compelled to give this matter every degree of authenticity that, as a magistrate, I took their account upon oath immediately on my return into the country. I saw no reason to doubt any of their evidence after the most minute investigation of it."

The meteorite was acquired by the British Museum in 1835, and today it can be seen in the Natural History Museum in London. It takes pride of place in the section devoted to meteorites as the first reliably recorded meteorite to come to earth in England. At the point where the meteorite landed there is a monument (see picture below) inscribed as follows.



Here
On this Spot, Decr. 13th, 1795
Fell from the Atmosphere
AN EXTRAORDINARY STONE
In Breadth 28 inches
In Length 36 inches
and
Whofe Weight was 56 pounds.

THIS COLUMN
In Memory of it
Was erected by
EDWARD TOPHAM

John Shipley, the shepherd who was closest to the meteorite when it landed, is buried in Wold Newton churchyard, very close to the south entrance. He is the first person to have been

buried in Wold Newton churchyard, as the Church first received a licence for interment only shortly before his death. His headstone is inscribed as follows:

JOHN SHIPLEY

Died May 17th 1829

Aged 51 years

'All you that do behold this stone,
Think how quickly I was gone,
Death does not always warning give,
Therefore be careful how you live.'