

Visitations of God and other startling events

A rural heritage

One of the fascinating aspects of researching people's family trees for them is the extent to which it opens up a world and a past they often knew nothing about beforehand. The same was true for me at the very beginnings of my research into my own family tree.

My mother and my maternal grandmother both died when I was quite young, and yet my strongest, warmest memories of my childhood are of them both. Like so many people, I didn't have the opportunity to ask all the questions I would want to ask them if I could sit down with them now, so my research was a revelation.

I was born in the South East London/Kent borders area, and had believed that both sides of my mother's family had always lived in that part of the country. I was therefore enormously surprised to discover that both sides of my grandmother's family had originated from Somerset, in the Langport-Yeovil-Chard triangle. It was my great grandfather and great grandmother who had first made the journey up to Kent, to join the Metropolitan Police and go into service – and subsequently nursing – at the Queen's House Royal Hospital School, Greenwich, respectively.

As someone who grew up in the town but who had always been drawn to the countryside – to the extent that I have spent my working life commuting significant distances in order to live out of town – I was immeasurably happy to discover that my family had a rural past and pleased that my ancestors were tied to the land, in so far as I felt it made some of my own interests make sense. In very many cases, my Somerset ancestors seem to have lived long and healthy lives and their days were ended by "decay of nature", to quote that commonly cited cause of death. Or in somewhat more dramatic fashion, in the case of one of my 4 x great grandfathers whose death in 1843 was certified by the Langport Coroner as being "Suddenly of Apoplexy by the Visitation of God"!

However, some of my romantic notions about rural life were brought up sharp in a few particular cases.

The hazards of agricultural employment

My great great grandfather, William Faulkner, was born in Isle Abbots in Somerset in 1855, and at the time of the 1901 Census was working as on a farm in Clifton Maybank, near Yeovil. I was therefore astonished that a search of the British Newspaper Archive threw up the following news piece from the Western Gazette, dated Friday 11 October 1901:

A man named Faulkner, who is in the employ of Mr. Whittle, yesterday (Thursday) got up into a tree in Clifton Maybank for the purpose of lopping off a bough with a scythe, when he slipped, and fell onto the scythe. He terribly gashed his right wrist, cutting into the joint, severing the great blood vessels.

Whilst such an accident today would be viewed as serious enough, modern surgical techniques – particularly in the light of the recent news of a successful hand transplant – would mean that the prognosis would be reasonably good. However, in 1901 the story looked somewhat different:

He terribly gashed his right wrist, cutting into the joint, severing the great blood vessels. Steps were taken to temporarily assuage the bleeding, and Faulkner was with all the haste taken into Yeovil, where he was seen by Dr. Colmer. The hand was not amputated, but Dr.

Colmer bound the wound up in the hope that there may still be enough blood vessels in the left wrist to carry on a collateral circulation.

Sadly, I will probably never know what happened to William after this accident, but one has to assume that it resulted in some degree of disability.

Lime kiln horror

Whilst this article alone highlighted some of the dangers faced by agricultural workers in a pre-Health & Safety regulated environment, I subsequently came across another story about another of my Somerset ancestors of a far more shocking nature, again via the British Newspaper Archive.

Joseph Singleton, brother of William Faulkner's mother, Elizabeth, was born in 1845 in Chillington. In 1875 he married Elizabeth Vickeray in St James Church, the parish church of Chillington, and by 1888 the couple had 8 children. The census records show Joseph's occupation as agricultural labourer, and in the autumn of 1888 he was employed as a lime burner at a kiln at St Raynes Hill by a Mr Vincent of Hill Farm, Chillington. The Western Gazette of 5 October 1888 recounts the following story:

On Wednesday evening Singleton did not return at his usual time, and after waiting several hours his wife went, about midnight, in search of him. She discovered his lifeless form in the kiln, which is situate in a large plantation. Her screams attracted the attention of Major Elers' keepers (Millar and Lewis), but on their going to the kiln the woman had left. They examined the place, however, and also found the body.

What the gamekeepers found must have stayed with them for the rest of their lives:

It presented a horrifying spectacle. In attempting to lift it one of the legs and a portion of the head fell off, not a particle of clothing remained, and the body was so disfigured as to be almost beyond recognition. With some difficulty the remains were taken from the kiln and conveyed to an inn to await the coroner's inquiry.

Indifferent inquest

The inquest was held at the Windwhistle Inn, which is still in use today as a public house on the A30 between Chard and Crewkerne. Elizabeth, Joseph's wife, and a number of local agricultural labourers, gave evidence at the inquest, much of which recounts the details outlined in the first part of the article. What is noticeable in the article is how the cold tone of some of the questions and observations at the inquest contrast with the horror of what the witnesses found. In particular, there was a focus on whether Joseph was a drinking man. The Deputy Coroner had clearly elicited from Joseph's wife that he was "a temperate man" and that he "had not complained of the smoke making him giddy or drowsy whilst at work". Another witness also gave testimony as to Joseph's state when he visited him earlier in the day:

Edward Matthews, of Hill Farm, Chillington, stated that on Wednesday afternoon, about three o'clock, he went to St. Rayne's Hill kiln with some calm. Joseph Singleton was in charge of the kiln. He then seemed in a perfectly healthy state and was sober.

Verdict

At the end of the inquest the jury returned a verdict of "Accidental Death". The Deputy Coroner concluded in a cold, matter of fact way:

The Coroner explained that persons working about kilns were liable from time to time to become drowsy and heavy through the fumes.

There was no apparent outrage at the tragic death of a husband and father of eight, nor calls for any measures to ensure such an accident could never happen again.

The cause of death recorded on the death certificate is equally dispassionate:

Deceased accidentally fell into the burning Lime Kiln, but whether by an effort in his work or during stupefaction by Fumes from the Kiln the jury are unable to say”.

We live in a time when most people have a certain cynicism about Health & Safety regulations, to the point of almost dismissing them. However, I for one applaud the measures now in place to ensure workers are protected from the kind of deaths and accidents that befell my Victorian ancestors!

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