

PROBLEM FAMILIES IN VICTORIAN RINGMER

by

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A small bundle of ill-written, ill-spelled notes and letters, often on scraps of paper, is to be found among the Hook manuscripts in the East Sussex Record Office (1). They are pathetic appeals to the Poor Law officials which tell of sickness, hardship and desperation among the poor of Chailey Union, and include a few from Ringmer. One of these, however, is not a request for assistance, but a letter from two irate ratepayers drawing the attention of the relieving officer to an alleged case of scrounging. The letter, postmarked 8th October 1848 and addressed to Mr. Merricks of "Coox brigs, Hoffam" (Cooksbridge, Offham), is reproduced below. As the spelling takes a little time to decipher a translation is appended.

Unfortunately we cannot identify the signatories to this letter. There are too many ratepayers with the initials J.H. and no one traceable so far who could sign himself R.J.P. (although there are several R.P.s). We have evidence, however, as to their literacy and manner of speech. The writing is reasonably well formed and fluent, and the writer knows how to begin and end a formal letter, but his spelling is phonic, and he seems not to have progressed beyond the early reading primers which divided words into separate syllables. An Education Enquiry in 1835 reveals that there was a National School in Ringmer with 90-100 children and other smaller schools (2), and in this year the workhouse school was established. But wherever J.H. or R.J.P. learned his letters he must have left early. As we read we can hear how the people of Ringmer talked - "ar" for "her", "they be a forse", "are a one", etc. And, whoever the writers were, they were well versed in Ringmer gossip.

We can, however, trace all the individuals referred to in the letter. Indeed, so rich are the records of the early Victorian age (3) that well over a century later we can recover sufficient information about them to bring the letter to life.

James Clark's Widow

Mary Clark was James Clark's second wife. He was baptised in Ringmer in 1784, one of about 10 children of Nicholas and Ruth Clark. Both his father and grandfather had been small tenant farmers, but James was reduced to the ranks of the agricultural labourers. In 1808 he married his first wife, Mary Vennel, by whom he had nine children before her death in 1824 at the age of 36.

The cause of her death may have been the birth of a tenth child, as an unbaptised infant, Joseph Clark, was buried ten days before her funeral. The family lived at Swingate, save for a brief period when for some unknown reason they were removed to Framfield under the settlement laws (4), but before long they returned. After losing his first wife James soon married again; Mary Reynolds, his second wife, had been born in Isfield, and was some 20 years younger, about the same age as her eldest stepdaughter Maria. Maria lived next door with her husband Joseph Ford, one of the Ringmer rioters who threatened the relieving officer on the introduction of the new Poor Law in 1835 and were jailed for their pains (5). Joseph and Maria had a large family, and one of their grandsons became Mayor of Gosport.

When Mary married James at least three of her stepchildren were still dependent, and she herself produced five children. James was evidently a dependable man, who supported his family in a stable home at Swingate for almost all his working life. He was employed two days a week as senior man of the labourers 'on the parish' up to the Swing Riots in November 1830, but immediately after the riots he lost this post (6). It is not clear if he was a rioter himself. In January 1839 he appears on the list of those entitled to use the parish soup kitchen (7), and was then employed working on the roads by the Surveyors; only four children are noted, so his earlier brood were out in the world. James and Mary's last child, George Nicholas, was born in 1839, and James died in 1844 at the age of 59.

Mary, then, was left with five children; Caroline, aged 16, may well have been out in service, Elizabeth was 13, Edward 11, Thomas 7 and George Nicholas 5. She obtained help from the parish, took a lodger, and by 1848 was in addition earning quite good money for a woman. All her sons were in work, at a time when employment was hard to find. The Clarks seem to have been respectable hard-working members of their class - what then of the accusation that Mary is claiming parish benefit while she is cohabiting with a man with whom she is so infatuated that she neglects her children in order to support him? It would be relevant to know whether the eldest daughter reported to have made this charge was Caroline, distressed about her mother's behaviour and worried about her younger brothers, or Maria Ford, the stepdaughter next door, who may have resented her father's second marriage to a young wife, and whose remarks may have been tinged with malice. What the letter insinuates may indeed have been true. Mary had lived for years with an elderly husband and was now in her early forties not worn out by excessive childbearing - five was a moderate number for those days - and she may have snatched at a belated 'romance', perhaps with a man younger than herself. But it seems unlikely

Sir I take the opportunity of writing
to you about James Clark's widow
of Ringate in the parish of Ringmer
stating what her income is and has been
for some time: parish pay 4s 6d
Edward the oldest 3s Thomas the next 2s 6d
Three shillings The youngest boy 2s 6d
and Mrs Clark is earning from six to
eight a week which makes her money
from eight to twenty shillings a week
and why should she have so much parish pay
and another have nothing at all
George Evans' wife has nothing, nor yet
Mac McKinley's wife. They both have
a man to live with them and they be a
force to keep them and their family too
or they must go into the workhouse.

Sir, I take the opportunity of writing to you about James Clark's widow of Ringate in the parish of Ringmer stating what her income is and has been for some time: parish pay, 4s 6d, Edward the oldest, 3s 0d, Thomas, the next, 2s 6d or 3s 0d, the youngest boy 2s 0d, and Mrs Clark is earning from six to eight shillings a week which makes her money from eighteen to twenty shillings a week, and why should she have so much parish pay and another have nothing at all.

George Evans' wife has nothing, nor yet Mac McKinley's wife. They both have a man to live with them who is forced to keep them and their family too or they must go into the workhouse.

and Mrs Clark as got a man to live with
or and why not make that man keep as
you do ~~the~~ They others Mrs Clark as ~~has~~ been
known to keep a man for seven weeks to ge
ther with out is earning a shilling and
of her daughter tells her mother that she w^{ould}
sooner take him and keep him for a month
than keep one of her own children for a week
and we tax payers don't like that they should
be so much dif^{erence} in these widows
and if you don't make a after a shill
we tax payers must at least the par
ish meeting when there is more of a
ring me again

Your most obedient

servants

R J P J H

And Mrs. Clark has got a man to live with her and why not make that man keep her as you do the others? Mrs Clark has been known to keep her man for seven weeks together without his earning a shilling, and her eldest daughter tells her mother that she would sooner take him and keep him for a month than keep any one of her own children for a week. And we tax payers don't like there to be so much difference between these widows and if you don't make an alteration we taxpayers must attend the parish meeting if and when there is one at Ringmer again.

Your most obedient servants

R.J.P. J.H.

that the children suffered since, in those days of frequent child mortality, she reared them all. Her youngest son, George, was by 1871 a butcher in North Street, Cliffe, Lewes (8). He may have been in partnership with his half-brother Richard, born in 1817, who was by then a master pork butcher in the same street.

What action if any was taken by Mr. Merricks on receipt of this letter is not known, but in 1851 Mary was still living at Lower Swingate with her three youngest children; there was, apparently, no lodger. She was working as a charwoman, and 'minding' Charles Henry Blaber, aged six months. Edward now worked as a farm labourer. Not far away, in Broyle Lane, William Bridger, a bachelor farm labourer aged 43, lived with his mother Sarah Tasker and sister Ann. Sarah Tasker, aged 82, was a recipient of Hay's Charity, and both she and Ann were on parish relief. Now the beneficiaries of Hay's Charity had to be impeccably respectable, and we may assume William was respectable too. In 1854 he and Mary were married.

Mary's career suggests that she was a survivor, a tough and capable woman. How far she was, in 1848, a victim of slander we cannot tell.

George Evans' Wife (or Widow)

Why there should be any doubt about her marital status will be clearer when her story has been told.

George Evans was baptised in 1814, a son of Ringmer labourer Robert Evans and his wife Elizabeth, and a grandson of the Robert Evans who was landlord of the Cock Inn for many years up to his death in 1818. Robert and Elizabeth had a sequence of eight sons between 1806 and 1824, followed by two daughters. Seven of the boys survived to adulthood, and they seem to have been a lawless tribe. John Evans (born 1810) already had a string of convictions for poaching when prosecuted for setting snares in the Plashett in 1836, and in the 1839 Soup List his occupation is given as 'vagrant'. In the Sussex Express of 21st August 1841 appeared a police advertisement for his apprehension on a charge of stealing a donkey from James Briggs, a Ringmer labourer, the previous November. John Evans was stated to be "about 30 years old, 5ft 6½in high, blue eyes, light coloured hair and stout build. He has a wife, boy and girl with him. The wife has her left leg swollen at the ankle to an immense size, is fair haired and about 28 years old. The boy is five years old, the girl about eight. Evans and his family are in the habit of camping on the sides of roads and commons in Sussex, Kent and Surrey. He is a notorious poacher."

John Evans had sold Briggs' donkey to a man in Dorking, but unfortunately for him it was then bought by a gypsy who brought it back to South Malling, where it was recognised. The gypsy was arrested, but his statement in his defence put the police on the track of the real culprit (9). We have not discovered whether John was ever apprehended.

In September 1837 George's younger brother James, then aged 17, was charged by Mr. Martin of Ringmer that on the 30th August he had wilfully damaged Mr. Martin's duck. His father offered an alibi, saying the boy was in bed unwell, but he was not believed; James was fined 1s Od for the damage and 15s Od costs, with the alternative of one week's hard labour. If he suffered this 'short sharp shock' it proved ineffective, as three months later he stole four tame rabbits from the barber-shoemaker William Thompson, who lived in the house that is now Barclays Bank. Thompson's teenage son Nelson tracked the thief's footprints across the fields and caught James redhanded. This time the penalty was four weeks hard labour and two weeks solitary confinement (10).

George Evans lived at Barcombe for some years previous to 1841, working for a farmer named Knight, trying to support his wife Frances and their brood of young children. His parish settlement remained in Ringmer, however, and in January 1839, the month his youngest child was born, he appears in the Soup List. Then in 1841 the cottage of a Chailey labourer called Henry Smith was burgled and the local constable (another shoemaker by trade) traced the thief's footprints to the cottage in Barcombe of another Evans brother, Caleb (born 1817), where Henry Smith's half boots were discovered. The county police arrested Caleb and offered to charter a conveyance from the Royal Oak to take their prisoner into Lewes, but he insisted on walking. On reaching Offham he demanded a drink at the public house. The police were probably not unwilling to comply, and it was maybe while they were sipping their pints that their charge escaped by leaping over a wall. George was arrested too, and a police search at one or another of the brothers' houses revealed sundry articles of stolen clothing, parts of two guns (were they to be used in poaching?), 3 lbs of tea, a quantity of bacon and several saws, hammers and chisels. George pleaded that he must fodder Farmer Knight's cattle and the police accompanied him to the stockyard, whence he escaped into a wood. He was later recaptured at Laughton, and Caleb was seen by George Taylor entering a beer shop in Glynde. George fetched Spencer Taylor, parish constable and journeyman blacksmith, and Caleb too was recaptured, after a struggle.

Both brothers were committed for trial. They were charged with stealing Smith's half boots; another pair and a glazed hat belonging to G. Gladman of

Laughton; receiving, knowing them to be stolen, a leg of pork and a pair of gloves, the property of Robert Neve, a retired Ringmer farmer whose name survives in Neaves Lane; receiving a third pair of half boots, parts of a gun and two knives belonging to John Chatfield of Barcombe; and stealing a shirt the property of Edward Kimber of Lindfield and a stone bottle owned by his wife that had been taken while Edward's body lay dead in his house. Also charged with this last offence was Luke Sindon, a 21 year old Ringmer labourer. George was sentenced to transportation for life, and Caleb to transportation for 10 years for each of two offences. The unfortunate Sindon had already been in trouble when, as a destitute and homeless youth, he stole a turnip out of a field, and received a two week jail sentence which had at least put a roof over his head. Now this old conviction prevented a mild sentence as a first offender, and he too was transported for 10 years (11).

Sentenced to transportation at the same time as George Evans was Thomas Bray, a deserter from the army, who had in 1840 been acknowledged by the parish overseers as belonging to Ringmer, though they commented that "no marriage entry could be found for the woman stated to be his wife". Bray was also arrested in the Glynde beershop, when Spencer Taylor saw him wearing new boots and deduced that they were stolen. His other offences included stealing tools from the Rev. John Constable's gardener and stealing and slaughtering a sheep near Rushey Green. These four were not the only Ringmer residents who helped people the antipodes. James Blaber and John Trigwell, two of the Ringmer rioters of 1835, had been transported in 1837 convicted of stealing fowls and rabbits from the Green Man. At the same time a Ringmer pauper in Chailey workhouse, John Divall, previously convicted of a felony, was transported for life for stealing a leg of mutton in Barcombe (12). A craving for meat must have been strong among the poor. Reprehensible these mens' conduct may have been, but they do not fit the stereotype of 'sely Sussex'; they showed enterprise, and a certain amount of cunning.

Frances Evans cannot have been ignorant of her husband's activities, but even if she disapproved she may not have been able to do much about them. Now, at the age of 25, she was left with no means of support and no alternative to the workhouse. The 1841 census finds her in Chailey workhouse with her two youngest children, John and Harriet, aged 4 and 2. The eldest girl Ann, aged 7, went to Ringmer workhouse, probably with a younger sister Lucy (13), into the care of Mr Shackelford, who had the previous year been rebuked for punishing the children with excessive severity, and chastising the girls himself although instructed not to do so (14). Lucy did not long survive the breakup of the family - she died in June and was buried by Chailey Union.

How long Frances Evans remained in the workhouse is unknown, but the ratepayers' letter is evidence that she did escape, and found a man to support herself and her family. As George was probably illiterate, she may not have known whether she was his wife or his widow. She was buried in Ringmer in April 1853, aged 39. Her daughter Ann died two years later at the age of 22, while once again incarcerated in the Chailey Union workhouse.

Mack McKinley's Wife

Mary McKinley was not a local woman. She came from Nottingham, and as her husband Mack or William McKinley was a gunner he probably brought her with him, as a very young bride, when he was stationed at the Royal Horse Artillery Barracks in Ringmer. This early separation from her home environment and her family may explain in part her subsequent history. If her age in the 1841 census is correct she was not more than 17 when her eldest son, John, was born in 1827. Later William left the army, and in 1834 was working in Ringmer as a labourer. After that he disappears from the Ringmer records. Mary has a son Edward born in 1837 and another, Michael, born in 1839, when she is described as a servant. These infants are not stated to be illegitimate, but no father is recorded. In the January 1839 Soup List Mary appears as a single parent with 6 children - Michael would be the seventh. She is not given any occupation and, unlike almost all the rest of the parish poor, she is not apparently to receive any parish coal. In March of this year her eldest son John, then aged 12, absconded with two others from Ringmer workhouse taking with him clothing belonging to the Union (15). We do not hear of him again. Mary's eighth child, an infant girl called Elizabeth, was buried in 1840, and in the 1841 census Mary is living with her four youngest children in a cottage on the Lewes Road where "The Islands" now stand. Also with her is a lodger called Charles Stanford, an agricultural labourer of about her own age, and the son of a former owner of the Anchor Inn. Charles might presumably have lived in a house he owned at Rushey Green rated at £2 0s 0d p.a. (16), but he had let that, and lived instead in the house Mary rented that was valued at only £1 0s 0d, amongst the lowest in the village. The cottages where she lived were recalled at the end of the century as having been particularly disreputable, and the haunts of the troopers' followers (17).

Was Charles Stanford still living with Mary and supporting her and her family in 1848? If he was he had taken on a load of trouble. Mary's nine month old baby Daniel died in a Chailey Union workhouse in 1843, Edward died aged 7 in 1844 and George at 7 months in 1847. George was recorded as illegitimate at his baptism, and with him were baptised two other illegitimate little McKinleys,

Mary and a second Daniel. When the ratepayers' letter was written Mary was getting on for 40, had had 12 children, several of them illegitimate, and lost at least four. But, like Frances Evans, she may have been in an anomalous position. William had presumably deserted her and gone elsewhere - he may even have been transported. She had, as far as we know, no relatives in Ringmer to turn to. Deserted wife or widow, she may have formed a fairly stable relationship with Charles Stanford, or may have accepted the protection of other men as well. She cannot be found in the 1851 census, though her teenage son, Charles was then living in the household of Joseph Hillman, blacksmith, as a shop boy. Let us hope he did well, as the McKinleys do not sound on the whole a reputable family.

If Mary Clark ever learned of the contents of the letter about her, one imagines that she would not have been amused to find herself bracketed with Frances Evans and Mary McKinley. There was no shame attached to poverty in the 19th century, but maintaining a respectable character was vitally important. A good character brought in its wake not only respect but also such tangible benefits as Hay's Charity. However, J.H. and R.J.P. were apparently concerned not with morals but with the way the ratepayers' money was spent. Indeed, the main purpose of their letter may have been to point out that the character of applicants for parish relief, regarded as a crucial factor by the Ringmer vestry under the old Poor Law (18), was much less relevant under the harsher and less flexible rules imposed by the Poor Law Commissioners after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Whatever respect James and Mary Clark may have earned in the past, she was only entitled to relief on the same basis as the Evans and the McKinleys.

References

- (1) ESRO/HOOK/22/10/2
- (2) We thank Elizabeth Doff for this information.
- (3) Personal information for which no other source is indicated has been obtained from the Victorian census returns and the parish registers of Ringmer and, in the case of the Evans family, Barcombe.
- (4) ESRO/PAR 461/32/2/102
- (5) M. Diggle, 'Ringmer Poor in Chailey Union, 1835-1841', Ringmer History No. 1, p. 22; Sussex Weekly Advertiser, 1st June, 8th June & 6th July 1835.
- (6) ESRO/PAR 461/31/1/6
- (7) A List of Persons who have Soup and Coal, January 1839, in ESRO/PAR 461/38/1
- (8) C. Brent, 'Lewes in 1871; A Household and Political Directory', p. 40 (University of Sussex, 1978)

- (9) Sussex Agricultural Express, 21st August 1841
- (10) Sussex Agricultural Express, 30th September 1837 & 30th December 1837
- (11) Sussex Agricultural Express, 13th, 20th & 27th March, and 8th & 22nd May 1841.
For Luke Sindon's previous offence see 30th December 1837, when Sindon was also acquitted of the rabbit theft of which James Evans was convicted.
- (12) Sussex Agricultural Express, 20th & 27th March 1841, 4th & 25th February 1837
- (13) Lucy Evans does not appear in either the Ringmer or Barcombe baptismal registers. However, George and Frances had a daughter baptised as Harriet (the same name as given to their youngest daughter) at Barcombe in 1834 and also a son baptised there as George Weston Evans in 1836, both of whom have disappeared by 1841.
- (14) M. Diggle, op. cit. pp. 25-26
- (15) ESRO/G2/1a/1
- (16) House valuations are from an 1841 Poor Rate in ESRO/PAR 461/38/1
- (17) William Martin's reminiscences in a notebook deposited in the Barbican House Library of the Sussex Archaeological Society.
- (18) Appendix B of the 1834 Report of the Poor Law Commissioners. British Parliamentary Papers, Poor Law, Vol. 11, p. 520b (Irish University Press, 1970).