

# **GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE**

**HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE MADE ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S  
HISTORY**

by

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## Of bastardy bonds and other domestic matters

It was not only the landed gentry who paid a heavy price for sexual transgressions; records of the bastardy bonds issued during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century bear witness to large numbers of men who were obliged to face up to their moral and financial responsibilities as they were confronted by women who had been 'delivered of a bastard child', one born out of wedlock. When such claims were made, the recalcitrant father was brought before local officials, the overseers of the poor, or the churchwardens, or a Justice of the Peace.

In front of the tribunal, the accused was presented with a bastardy bond, which came in two sections; the first part was a preamble confirming that the local officials had received from the father of the 'bastard child' and his family a sum appropriate for the maintenance and education of the said child. The second part of the bond gave details of the case. The primary purpose of the bond was to ensure that the parish did not incur 'costs, charges, taxes, rates assessments, damages and expenses' of bringing up the child.

In 1735, the case of William Thornton came up before the tribunal. The preamble to the bond stated that "This is to certify whom it may concern that William Thornton of the parish of Great Staughton ... labourer has agreed and bargained with Charles Hall of the parish of Great Staughton to maintain Rich Burton, a bastard child of the parish aforesaid born of the body of Ann Burton, widow, late wife of George Burton' Thornton was obliged to pay 'the sum of twenty-one pounds of good and lawfull money of Great Britain'. He was to continue paying this sum 'for the term of nine years from the second of February 1735 to the second of February 1744' for the maintenance and education of Rich Burton. The document was jointly 'signed, sealed and delivered' and witnessed in the presence of the churchwardens, William Maxey, Lewis Alsop and the overseers of the poor, Arthur Beedle, Henry Sharman and John Hopkins.

A similar case arose on 15 July 1775 when Susannah Nicholson, 'declared that on the thirtieth day of March now last past at the town of Great Staughton ... she ... was delivered of a female bastard child'. The child, she declared, was likely to be a chargeable to the parish; she claimed that 'Joseph Fossey, barber, of ... Kimbolton ... had gotten her with child.' Joseph Fossey was bound over to pay the sum of £40 to save the 'parish of Great Staughton from any charge or expence for or by reason of the birth, education and maintenance of the said child'. In a further addition to the claim, it was reported that Susanna's father, John Nicholson, 'farmer of Great Staughton', and his son, also John, brother of Susannah, were also obliged to pay the sum of £40. This bond was signed by the then vicar of the parish, Rev. John Negus, 'one of his majesty's justices of the peace' and John Henson, overseer of the poor.

An interesting miscreant appeared before the overseers of the poor in 1772; he was Robert Favel and his father, John Favel, described as a shepherd, both of Great Staughton, and Jonathan Sexton of the parish of Sharnbrook. They were brought before Robert Brown and John Rose, churchwardens, and the Rt. Honourable Earl Ludlow and Toby Chauncey, overseers of the poor in Great Staughton. Ann Luffe, 'singlewoman of Agden Green' had been 'delivered of a female bastard child' on 18 July 1772. She said that 'the said bastard child is likely to become chargeable to the said parish' and she accused Robert Favel of 'having gotten her with child'. Robert Favel and his father were obliged 'from time to time and all times thereafter fully and clearly indemnify the [churchwardens and overseers of the poor] for the birth, education and maintenance of the said child'. The Favel family was to be involved in a village tragedy fifteen years later.

There are cases recorded of couples who were alleged to have 'intruded and came into the parish of Great Staughton', with the object of claiming poor relief. John Hall and his common law wife Jane Cole, together with 'a male bastard child of the age of six months' were brought before the overseers of the poor in 1812; the adjudication ruled that it was not the responsibility of Great Staughton to maintain the child. They ordered that the couple 'be removed and conveyed to Riseley, where the local overseers of the poor were charged to receive and provide for the couple'.

Denzil Onslow, of Staughton House, was called upon as a Justice of the Peace to adjudicate in the case of his footman, William Clark who was summoned on 13 July 1812, and obliged to pay £40 for the upkeep of the male child of Sarah Jackson. Denzil Onslow was again on duty in 1819 in the case of Robert George Salter who was bound to 'pay to the churchwardens the sum of two shillings and sixpence weekly and every week ... for and towards the Keeping, Sustentation and Maintenance of the said Bastard Child (which he begat of one Rose Hitchcock of Great Staughton) for and during so long time as the said Bastard Child shall be chargeable to the said Parish'.

Not all of the bonds could be immediately enforced. On 18 September 1828, Denzil Onslow JP granted a warrant for the apprehension of John Webb, in respect of the child 'he did beget' of Sarah Colburt of Great Staughton. When apprehended he was to be brought before the next General Quarter Sessions who would 'abide and perform such order ... in pursuance of an act passed in the eighteenth year of the reign of her late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, concerning bastards begotten and born out of lawful matrimony'.

### **Of sparrows and hedgehogs**

In 1712 and subsequent years, there are numerous references in the churchwardens' accounts to payments made to various citizens of the village for services rendered in supplying hedgehogs and sparrows: John Green received 2d for one hedgehog; John Issod was paid 10d for five hedgehogs. Similar payments continued throughout the century and beyond, so in 1745, for example, the churchwardens' accounts make frequent mention of 'the catching of sparrows and their eggs', for which the churchwardens paid a total of 15s 6d. In 1746, the bill was much less, just 3s 11d. William Sutton was paid 1s for sparrows in 1754 and 16s 4d two years later.

The reason for this seemingly bizarre trade was not, as might be imagined, to rid the village of avian pests, but to enhance the generally meagre diets of ordinary people. In *The Compleat City and Country Cook* by Charles Carter, published in 1736, there is an excellent recipe for 'Sparrow Pye'. 'You must have five dozen at least, lay betwixt every one a Bit of Bacon as you do when you roast them, and a Leaf of Sage and a little Force-meat at the Bottom of your Crust; put on some Butter a top and lid it; when bak'd for one Hour, which will be sufficient ... make a little thicken'd Gravy, put in the Juice of a Lemon; season with Pepper and Salt, Serve it hot and quick.'

The book is a marvellous compendium aimed at the 'Accomplish'd Housewife'. It contains 'Several Hundred of the Most Approv'd Receipts in Cookery, Confectionary [*sic*], Cordials, Cosmeticks, Jellies, Pastry, Pickles, Preserving, Syrups, English Wines.' There are handy hints on preparing the table for 'Ladies at the Late Instalment at Windsor; the Lord Mayor's Table; and Other Hall Dinners in the City of London'. The reliability of the advice offered is guaranteed by the author's considerable reputation. 'Charles Carter. Lately Cook to His Grace the Duke of Argyle, the Earl of Pontefract, the Lord Cornwallis, &c.' The book is no mere collection of recipes. There are 'Near Two Hundred of the Most Approved Receipts in Physick and Surgery, for the Cure of the Most Common Diseases Incident to Families; with Several Sovereign Receipts for the Cure of the Bite of a Mad Dog'.

For the hedgehog it is necessary to turn to a more exotic source, *Le ménagier de Paris*, written around 1383 by a citizen of Paris: 'Hedgehog should have its throat cut, be singed and gutted, then trussed like a pullet, then pressed in a towel until very dry; and then roast it and eat with cameline sauce, or in pastry with wild duck sauce.' The book includes a helpful note about the procedure to be undertaken if the hedgehog refuses to unroll itself: 'put it in hot water, and then it will straighten itself'.

### **A village tragedy**

On Tuesday 17 July 1787, at about four in the afternoon, a peal of bells was being rung at the church of St Andrew. Watching as the bell-ringers were at work was Thomas Cant, who lived by the church. What happened next was sudden, unexpected and violent. Thomas Cant was temporarily blinded by a flash of lightning which struck the church tower. At the same moment, Lord Ludlow, Member of Parliament for Huntingdon from 1768 to 1796 and owner of Staughton House, was returning to the village in his carriage after attending the marriage of one of his daughters.

Up in the tower itself, a tragedy had unfolded. Three people had been struck by lightning and killed instantaneously. One of those killed was John Chapman, aged forty, apparently one of Lord Ludlow's grooms at Staughton House. The other two victims were mere boys, Charles Favell, aged eleven, who had taken refuge from the storm in the church porch and then had gone up the tower, perhaps to get a better view of the spectacular natural phenomenon. The third victim was William Goosey, aged fifteen. A plaque on the exterior west face of the church tower tells the melancholy story:

In the Belfry of this Church  
John Chapman aged 40  
William Goosey aged 15  
Charles Favell aged 11  
were instantaneously killed by a flash of Lightning  
on the 17th July 1787 about 4  
in the afternoon  
In the presence of several persons  
Whose lives were miraculously preserved.

This Stone  
Is erected at the expense of the parish to perpetuate the memory of so awful a catastrophe.  
Whilst o'er their graves the tears of pity flow,  
May public virtue spring from private woe,  
Warned by their fate, the careless and secure  
Shall learn, though life's uncertain, death is sure.

William, son of John and Mary Goosey, of Great Staughton, had been baptised on 13 September 1772. Charles, son of John and Elizabeth Favel [*sic*], also of the village, had been baptised on 14 July 1776. There are no records in the register of baptisms and burials for John Chapman. William Goosey and John Chapman were apparently paupers and therefore no tax was payable for their burials. The victims were buried on the Thursday 19 July 1787, in the graveyard of St Andrew's Church.