

“Thousands stood at a distance, muttering that it was a hard case to hang a man for destroying a wicked old witch.”

Hertfordshire’s Last Witch Hunt

Taken from www.stcross.nildram.co.uk/witch.html

The Hunt

Over the last 240 years many accounts have been written of the strange events that occurred in Tring, Gubblecote and Wilstone during April of the year 1751. The angry mob that gathered around the workhouse and church in Tring followed by the dragging of Ruth, the so-called witch, and John Osborne her husband, from the vestry, and the tragic sequel - the drowning- of Ruth in a pond at Wilstone Green, stated in the records as “Wilstone Were or Wear”.

Those accounts, some written at the time and many a number of years afterwards, all give different locations and details and none, not even the authentic records from the County Office, pinpoint the pond where poor Ruth was ducked and met her death or where the gibbet was erected on Wilstone Green and Thomas Colley, the man convicted of the crime was hung in chains.

This tragic affair started, according to some writers with the two old people begging for food at a farm in Gubblecote and when refused and turned away tempers became a little frayed and Ruth’s mutterings were taken by the farmer as a curse on himself, his farm and cattle.

Unfortunately, not long was to elapse before serious troubles befell this gentleman and his stock and with word quickly getting round of the old couple’s visit it was generally believed that they were witch and wizard, and they were avoided by many local inhabitants.

It is quite possible they were habitual beggars, a strange couple no doubt, and probably a nuisance. Or again, was it because they were paupers, (some accounts do mention this) unable to work and dependent upon the community for their existence and not too well thought of by the farmers and middle-class families, who paid a parish rate for the upkeep of the poor.

As to the extent of the Farmer’s troubles, we have no record, but one can imagine the affair was well discussed in the Ale Houses of the district and this eventually led to a person whose name is not known employing Daniel Nickols of Long Marston, recorded as a serving man, to take the following text to William Dell the Town Crier of Hemel Hempstead, who for the sum of four pence cried this notice on Monday April 14th 1751, Hemel Hempstead Market Day. This same notice was also cried at Winslow and Leighton Buzzard on their respective market days around this date.

“This is to give notice that on Munay next there is to be at Long Marcon in the Parish of Tring two hill desposed persons to be ducked by the neighbours consent.

During the days that followed the whole area was kept well informed of the wicked deeds these two poor people were supposed to have committed and grew more hostile towards them. So much so, that as the day of the ducking grew nearer Matthew Barton, the overseer of the poor in Tring, sensing some real mischief was afoot made an to avert the impending trouble, and as we shall read, upon their request took them into the workhouse for their safety.

But upon Sunday evening 21st April it became clear from reports of the large crowds gathering that this action would not be sufficient. And so, in the early hours of Monday April 22nd, they were taken from the Workhouse and as an extra safety precaution, lodged in the Vestry of Tring Church

The events which then followed, and which led to the death of Ruth Osborne are perhaps best recounted by going through the details of the subsequent inquest.

John Tomkins (Master of the Workhouse) was called to give evidence at the inquest, upon Ruth Osborne held at the Half Moon Ale House, on Wilstone Green, on April 25th 1751 before His Majesty's Coroner, Samuel Atkinson, and also at the enquiry at Tring held on May 21st before the Justices of the Peace, Squire Gilbert Williams of Tring, Reverend Roland Johnson of Hemel Hempstead and George Carpenter of Redbourn with the High Sheriff. John Tomkins paints a vivid picture of the happenings in and around the Workhouse on Monday 22nd April. He stated that:

“On Saturday last the 20th instant, John Osborne and Ruth his Wife, sent to the Workhouse by the order of Mathew Barton, one of the Overseers of the poor,. For their being provided for as poor people, and on Monday following being the 22nd between the hours of eleven and twelve in the morning a great mob came to the Workhouse and demanded the old witch and wizard that came from Long Marston, meaning the said John Osborne and his wife, upon which he told them that they were not there, but the mob insisted that they were and if he did not let them in they would force in by violence “

Tomkins, finding the mob increasing every minute, was forced to open the yard gate and allow them to search the house and grounds but.....

“Not finding the persons they wanted several of them went into the garden, whilst some still remained in the house and then came a fresh mob, one of whom (a stranger to the examinant, as were all the others of them) said that if he did not deliver up the witch and wizard to the mob in order to be ducked, they would pull the house flat to the ground, and soon after a stone was flung at the window and all more till they broke, every window in the house and most of the lower windows and frames were entirely demolished, one brick end of the house was pulled down and a garden fence which was of pales.

They also destroyed and pulled down a brick wall belonging to the garden. One of the mob said “it's a strong house” and believed that they would not get it down, another replied, yonder is straw enough we will get some and burn it down and when we have done that we will pull your town down, and threatened the examinant's life and the examinant being fearful of the ill consequences if he did not deliver them, told the ringleaders if they would go with him he would deliver them up and immediately went to the vestry in the Church at Tring and opening the door the mob rushed in and look them from there by violence and carried them away.”

Tomkins continuing, stated that he did not know where they were taking them and did not see them afterwards, but he did give the name of one Richard Symonds of Aldbury, Labourer, who was among the rioters and greatly assisting in the pulling down and demolishing the said workhouse and fence.

The same tale of destruction was also given by many of the onlookers which included a Wilstone Baker, William Puttnam. (The Puttnams were evidently well established as village bakers by 1751 and their names can be traced as bakers throughout the 19th century. The Baker's shop was in New Road and this family only moved away when the old cottages were demolished to make way for the present Rothschild Houses built in 1907).

William Puttnam stood with William Watkins, Shoemaker, Thomas Harding, Carpenter and Thomas Stanbridge, Maltster, all of Tring. They saw a mob in Tring and the damage done but did not know any who were taking part.

Thomas Chappel a labourer and an inmate of the house, was set to watch and take notice of the people committing the offence, but he only saw one John of Flaunden or Flamstead break a gate down at the entrance of the Workhouse and saw another person, the son of a blacksmith of Leighton Buzzard, of whose person he knew, but did not know his name, doing great damage to the Workhouse, to the great terror of the people therein belonging to the house.

One might ask, where were the people in authority? The whole affair had been well advertised, yet no hand was raised to halt the destruction in progress.

Sebastian Grace, Blacksmith and Tring Constable, eventually came upon the scene summoned by the Overseers of the poor. He was ordered to keep the peace and taking his staff of office, he demanded that the peace should be kept, but the mob replied. *"He is only the Constable, don't mind him"*, and some of them threatened his life. He saw bricks and stones flung at the windows by the populace at the same time demanding the witch and wizard. He, however, knew only one person in the crowd, this being Benjamin Price of Chesham, pattern drawer, who the examinant saw throw a particle of brick at the said windows.

Sebastian Grace, obviously stood very little chance against such a riot, the number of the mob had risen by this time to an estimated 4000, and the constable's plight was well summed up by William Watkins, the Tring shoemaker, from remarks he overheard. These remarks he stated on oath at the enquiry at Tring. Standing outside the workhouse he saw.....

"A great mob of people assembled together and they began to pull down the wainscot and part of the workhouse and one, East, as he called himself from Leighton Buzzard, who said he was a piece of a gardener, came to Sebastian Grace who was watching with his constable's staff to keep the peace, and told him he was a fool staying there and bid him go home and about his business, and East also said he had served the office Of constable and several other offices and would himself pull the house down for a farthing, which he repeated several times.

Watkins also saw John Waters the elder of Pightlesthorpe (Pitstone) also a shoemaker heading part of the mob and called them to the back of the Workhouse and encouraged them with many oaths and by a large cudgel in his hand to come after him for that the old bitch, meaning Ruth Osborne would come out on that side and escape, and later at Wilstone Green he also saw Thomas Colley and one Umbles, busy in ducking the woman but knew no other person acting there in the murder or in the riot"

The Murder

Such was the fear of the onlookers that the words "not known to the examinant" occurs over and over again, as will be seen in the evidence submitted at Wilstone. Harry Archer also observed all that took place. He saw a large crowd assembled in Tring and witnessed all that was taking place.

He was present when the mob seized John Osborne and his wife, under the pretence to duck them for witches and..... *"Saw a person of Leighton Buzzard, commonly known by the name of Red Beard, who followed the occupation of selling brooms and bottoming chairs, take Ruth Osborne upon his back near the Church in Tring in a close called Pond Close and*

several of the mob beat them with sticks and she called out 'for God's sake don't murder me'“

Archer was also present at Wilstone Green near the water called 'Ware' or 'Wire' , where he saw the same person called Red Beard, with others, bring the woman to be ducked, and he saw Red Beard tie the rope about her and another person on the other side, draw her across by the rope, but the examinant did not know him and soon after, one Umbles or De Umbles, and another person, again unknown to the examinant, take her in his arms and carry her into the middle of the pond and laid her down in the water till it was thought she might be drowned and they then carried her out and set on the bank out of the water for half an hour, when she was carried into the water again, and then turned about by one Colley and soon after taken out of the water and laid upon the bank, the examinant was informed and believed that she was dead. John Worster also saw the naked body of Ruth Osborne by the waterside and being left for dead.

John Osborne, husband of the deceased, described as a labourer of Long Marston, came forward and gave the following evidence. He was with some difficulty spared his wife's fate and gave a very detailed account of events before and after leaving the church in Tring, as follows:.....

“On Saturday the 20th day of April last he was told by his neighbours that he and his wife were to be ducked on the Monday following, as wizard and witch, and advised them to remove from their house to some other place in order to prevent any mischief which might ensure and accordingly they came to Tring Workhouse, where they both rested on Saturday night and that on the morning following, being the 22nd of April, at three in the morning, they were both locked in the church to secure them from the mob, which was apprehended would be on that day, and that about noon, the vestry door was opened and a great number of people rushed in and laid hold of the examinant and some of them took hold of his wife and dragged them away to a place, called Gubblecot, in she Parish of Tring and put them into a house belonging to one John Bullerfield, at the sign of the Black Horse there and tied them up in a room and told them they would take them to Wilstone, but they would not harm them but try them for witch and wizard and accordingly carried them to Wilstone where they were both stript and put into a pond of water, being tied both hand and feet together, and he said he knew only two persons who were concerned in the riot and ducking them, who were Thomas Colley who is since committed to Hertford Jail and Francis Hopton of Ivinghoe in the County of Bucks, Plumber and Glazier who seized them in the Vestry in order to ducked “

So much for the evidence of John Osborne at the enquiry held in Tring on the 21st of May 1751. But many queries arise from this statement, some accounts, written at the time state that the farmer who was bewitched was a Mr. Butterfield, but the Gentleman's Magazine of 1751 reports that a publican was the victim, and he started the witch hunt. John Osborne said that he was taken to a house of a Mr Bullerfield at the sign of the Black Horse.

No records have so far come to light of such a house in Gubblecote. The one Black Horse Ale House, being Paddock Cottage, Wilstone. But to return to the enquiry in Tring and the very interesting statement by a Mr Nott Gregory, Yeoman Farmer. The examinant on his oath says that he

“Lives at Wilstone Green in the Parish of Tring aforesaid and about 2 or 3 of the clock in the afternoon of Monday 22nd day of April last, some of his children came into the house and said “they have got them”, and he understood them to be John Osborne and Ruth his wife, whom he had heard were to be ducked on that day as wizard and witch, upon that he went into one of his fields, called Days Field, to find out whether the alarm was true or not and there he saw a great number of people going towards some water in a meadow called Ten Acres, where he imagined they were going to duck the said poor people. That the said

water being running water, some people had stopt the current in order to pen a head for ducking them, but the examinant broke down the..... and told the mob that there was no water there whereupon, some of them offered to strike him with sticks and he believes they would, had he not gone away from them, and he further says that the number of people assembled might be near 4000 but he says he does not know any one of them and that they were all strangers to him”

And so, the sorry story continues with evidence given by John Worster, victualler of Tring, with Harry Archer, who stood by the pond. It was, they said, between 5 o'clock and 6 o'clock in the evening of Monday last they were near a pond of water on Wilstone Green and saw a great mob of people with a woman in a sheet and a rope tied about her and fastened in such a manner that a man on the opposite side dragged her through the pond (which was about 5 feet deep) and laid her on the bank.

At this point Harry Archer moved to the rear of the mob, sickened by the proceedings, but about half an hour afterwards, most of the mob had left her and he saw her laying on the bank and dead. He did not know any who were involved, and was told by some onlookers, that it was Ruth Osborne of Long Marston who had been ducked for a witch.

Edward Chapman of Wingrave also witnessed the ducking and saw two men take her in their arms and carry her to the centre of the pond and when they had finished with her, her husband John was dragged across also.

He goes on: *“One of the men dragged her across the pond to the bank where her husband lay and dragging her across the sheet came off and she was quite naked and when they had got her to the other side three or four of the mob took her up and carried her to a public house on Wilstone Green and the examinant also says he then saw her and believes she was dead, drowned in the manner aforesaid and does not know any of the persons concerned in the murder.”*

John Holmes, farmer, of Tring followed. He saw the Chimney Sweep, Colley, turning and prodding her with a stick, and at one time she managed to get her head above the water, she cried and grabbed the stick, but he wrenched it from her and left her lying in the water. But again, Holmes did not know any other person concerned in the murder, and much the same evidence was given by John Stanbridge, Maltster, John Humphrey, Wheelwright, William Rolf, Apothacary, and John Grace, Farmer, of Tring.

Colley they saw come round the mob after the ducking and asked for money for the pleasure he had given them. Bolos Molongs, Landlord of the Half Moon and John Foster of Tring, Surgeon, must add the final statements which differ to some extent from John Osborne.

“Bolos Molongs. Victualler, on his oath says that about three in the afternoon of Monday last, the said Ruth Osborne was; brought to his house aforesaid by a very great mob of people, in a riotous manner and carried her upstairs, where she was kept for near three quarters of an hour, afterwards she was brought in again by some of the mob but she was: then dead, as the examinant believes, and he further says that they put her into a bed and left her, that as soon as: the mob was dispersed, he went to see her and she was; then dead which was about a quarter of an hour after she was brought into his house and he also says he does not know any of the persons concerned in the said mob”;

The Trial

William Colley, the Tring Chimney Sweep, obviously the worse for drink was soon taken into custody, first to Tring and then to the County Jail at Hertford, charged with the murder of Ruth Osborne, but as regards the instigation of the Tring riots, a month was to elapse before the enquiry was held before the Justices in Tring, which gave those concerned ample time to make good their escape.

The Reverend Johnson, in his letter dated May 23rd 1751, to Earl Cowper, gives the names of those implicated, as stated in the enquiry.

“Last week within a month, limited by statute for the enquiry, the Rev. Spencer Gilbert Williams, George Carpenter Esq. and myself awarded a receipt to the High Sherriff of the County to come before us twenty five persons to enquire for His Majesty of the riot lately committed in Tring. Accordingly, last Tuesday we held a session at Tring and the sherriff and his deputy answered and upon evidence there produced upon oaths it did answer that Benjamin Price of Chesham, Pattern Drawer, Francis Hopton of Ivinghoe, Glazier, Henry Worster of Pitstone, labourer and Richard Symonds of Aldbury, labourer, did commit several riotous and unlawful acts at Tring aforesaid ...”;

Conclusions

The site of the gibbet is said to have been either on Wilstone Green or at Gubblecote Cross. Wilstone Green covered a huge area and certainly all of the village of Wilstone at the time but there is no evidence of a hanging ever taking place there. Folk tales coupled with the Genuki statement of the gibbet being near a moat would place the hanging at the point in Gubblecote where four routes meet.

The location of the pond is more problematic as there are numerous tales as to its location. The first places it in Astrope Lane at Long Martson. On the maps Astrope Lane runs from Long Marston to Astrope and no further but this section of road shows no evidence of a pond even on the map from 1883.

It is said that in 1971 the farmer at College Farm filled in the pond and cut down the trees that covered the lane which is long enough ago for the site of the pond to have blended into the surroundings. There is a deep ditch beside the road but nowhere else and the ground looks marshy so this could be a possible candidate for the site. It is possible that the adjoining field was owned by College Farm as. Even though it is nearer to Astrope Farm this farm does not appear on the 1883 map and is on the wrong side of the stream which runs across the land in this area.

On the old Gubblecote map on the previous page a pond is distinctly shown just to the NE of College Farm, but this pond is absent from the current map. This large pond would have been owned by College Farm, so this is a definite possible site especially as it has now disappeared. This would also be a good choice as the first attempt to duck the victims was by either damming the stream in Lukes Lane (just to the north) or by dragging them through a marshy area, a suitable candidate for which lies at the west end of Lukes Lane but is now built on. This would also be a good site as the Ruth's body was taken to the Half Moon alehouse in Wilstone which lies just half a mile away with a road running from College Farm. On the map on a Wilstone website Astrope Lane doesn't just run from Long Marston towards Astrope as the map has it marked as running from Astrope towards Wilstone and passing just to the southwest of College Farm.

On www.wilstone.me.uk Dinah's Pond was said to have been in Watery Lane, this is a considerable distance away from all the other sites and if Ruth was drowned there why was her body not taken to somewhere like the Red Lion in Marsworth which is only 0.3 mile away whilst the Half Moon at Wilstone is best part of 2 miles away.

One report said that the Osbornes were kept at the Half Moon before the ducking so that would be a logical place to take Ruth's body but why go all the way to Marsworth when Gubblecote was so much nearer?

On the old map of 1883 a pond is shown in Watery Lane right next to the canal, but would this have been there prior to the canal (today there is a building where the pond stood).

On the website from which the main story was taken (www.stcross.nildram.co.uk) the following is given:

The area around Sandbrook Lane consisted of Berewic Field, Wick Mead, Pond Close and Long Close, all names going back for centuries, and we are sure formed the nucleus of our first village settlement. Sandbrook Holding and the sewage pumps stand on Berewic Field with the Wick Mead Field and Pond Close just beyond the gate. Previous to the enclosures and before being cut in half by the Aylesbury Arm of the canal, this field stretched as far as the bridle way with an outlet into Astrope Lane opposite Dinah's Pond

In Addition:

The Lower Wick Mead field, before the coming of the canal in the early 1800s, stretched as far as the bridleway that joins Astrope Lane at the ford opposite Dinah's Pond....The small three-cornered piece just beyond the gate was named Pond Close and, when in use as dairy fields, this must have been very important as a cattle drinking area. An old path carried on round this pond and through Long Close to Chapel End Lane, joining Deans Lane and thence to Tring.

This does show that there must have been a pond in Wilstone otherwise why Pond Close. In addition a pond has existed near Wilstone Great Farm since at least 1883 (as it appears on a map) and still exists today. Looking at the 1883 map the field which was cut in half by the canal is likely to be the one marked on the map on the left. This field does have an outlet into Astrope Lane (or at least what the website refers to as Astrope Lane, marked with an X) and is very near to a ford implying Dinah's Pond was in the field to the southwest of College Farm as the pond was opposite this point. This track continued across the road and on to College Farm and still does today.

Black Dog

Afterwards no one would linger near Thomas Colley's gibbet after dark so the site developed a sinister reputation. Until the wartime airfield was built at Marsworth, which necessitated the widening of Lukes Lane, many tales were told of strange happenings in the area. In one tale Old Luke was supposed to rattle his chains at late night revellers. Some people said that the area of the gibbet was haunted by a large black dog with burning eyes. A huge dog, black as a sweep, Thomas's profession.

One night a local schoolmaster was returning home in a gig with another person when he encountered the dog. 'When we came near the spot where a portion of the gibbet had lately stood, we saw on the bank of the roadside a flame of fire as large as a man's hat. "What's that?" I exclaimed. "Hush!" said my companion and suddenly pulling in his horse, made a dead stop. I then saw an immense black dog just in front of our horse, the strangest looking creature I ever beheld. He was as big as a Newfoundland, but very gaunt, shaggy with long ears and tail, eyes like balls of fire and large, long teeth for he opened his mouth and seemed to grin at us. In a few minutes the dog disappeared seeming to vanish like a shadow or to sink into the earth and we drove over the spot where he had lain.'

Another Ghost

It is said that the top of Vicarage Lane in Marsworth is haunted by the ghost of Tom Pratt. Tom came from Great Farm (now called Moat Farm) and was killed in a car crash. Since then the headlights of his car have been seen as he drives up to the farm on dark nights.

