

A Murdered Murderer

It is strange when you are researching family and local history, often a small, insignificant link gives rise to an interesting item. Inspired by Pip Wright's recent talk about using newspapers as a source of information, I was looking for information on Shelfanger and I found a man who owned cottages in the village. This led on to

On the 31st July 1851, in the village of Thrandeston, a young woman was stabbed, and the next day died of her wounds. The murderer was a John Mickleburgh from Thrandeston, the victim Mary Baker.

John Mickleburgh was born in about 1810, died 1888.

In 1841¹, in Thrandeston, John (30, farmer) was living with his mother (60, of independent means), along with his wife Frances (25), daughter Mary (2), and William Algar (13, male servant). At the time of the Census of 1851² he was living at Great Green, still in Thrandeston (farmer of 40 acres employing 3 labourers, born in Gissing), with wife Francis (37, born in Shelfanger), three daughters, Mary (12, scholar), Frances (7, scholar) and Kate (5, scholar), and two servants, Mary Baker (20, house servant) and Charles Baker (21, farm labourer).

John farmed about 40 acres, much of which he owned, and had several cottage properties at Thrandeston and ***Shelfanger***, along with common rights on Thrandeston Green. He was ably helped in business by his wife, Frances, who was generally a well-liked person. John's character was of an intelligent person although only partially literate, but inclined to be harsh and bad tempered (especially towards his wife).

The tragic story probably started some time before 1851 as the house servant, Mary Baker had been employed by John for about 2 years when she left for an unknown reason, only to return to work for Frances as a general maid a year later. (There were rumours that John and Mary had been in a more than employer/servant relationship even though she was probably engaged for at least 2 years to a young man named William Bootman!)

The 1851 Thrandeston Fair was held on Thursday, 31st July and the Friday, 1st August. The day before, Mary had been given permission by Frances to attend the Fair but with the proviso that she was home by half past nine.

Mary went to the fair and was accompanied by William Bootman. The couple, along with others, spent some time drinking. They ended up at Marsh Cottage, where it is assumed that John became jealous of the attentions Mary was getting from William. John returned to the fair where he purchased a knife for 2s. from a hawker William Sayer. On returning to the cottage, he stabbed Mary. He was tackled and seized by two men who took the knife away from him, and a constable was called.

Mary fainted and was taken upstairs and attended to by Mr. Walter William Miller, a surgeon from Eye, and given spiritual help from the Rev. Thomas Lee French, the Rector of Thrandeston.

Police constable John Baker arrived and took John into custody and had charge of him at the station house in Eye.

In the morning of the following day, Mary was able to give an account of events but, sadly with her health deteriorating, she died at half past four that afternoon.

At 10 o'clock on Monday, 4th August, a Coroner's Court, along with jury, was convened by Charles Gross. It was held where the murder took place and was not particularly well received as the cottage smelt badly of the body. John did not attend; he was still at Eye in readiness to go before the magistrate. Much evidence around the circumstances of Mary's death was given. Finally, after instruction from the Coroner, the jury gave a verdict of 'Wilful Murder'.

At a Magistrate's Court at the Town Hall in Eye there was a preliminary examination of the case and all evidence was heard. There was a large crowd in attendance which required police to keep order. The result was that the prisoner was ordered to be committed to the County Gaol in Ipswich, to be tried at the next assizes on the charge of murder.

Making their way from Eye to Ipswich, the party stopped at the White Horse at Stoke Ash for refreshments. Seeing a knife on a table, John tried to acquire it with a view to suicide – he was unsuccessful!

Whilst at the County Gaol, John tried to go on hunger strike, saying he would not want the disgrace on his family if hanged at the gaol. He was told if he persisted he would be force-fed.

At 9 o'clock on Wednesday, March 24th, 1852 was the opening of the Suffolk Lent Assizes when John was tried for Mary's murder. One item of evidence was the deposition given by Mary Baker: *"I am a single woman, and have been living as servant to Mr. John Mickleborough, at Thrandeston. Yesterday evening, I was in this house in company with my sister, and William Bootman. At about 8 o'clock, Mickleborough came in. Master said, "Ah, Mor, I see you?" Master then passed me and went into the backhouse. He was not gone two minutes, before he came back again. He came up to me, but I did not feel him till he drew back, and said "Ah, Mor, you have*

had it now." I saw the knife in his hand, when he drew back. I then went into the backhouse, and fainted there. I was sitting by the side of William Bootman, when I was stabbed. When I came to myself, I was lying on a bed in a room upstairs. I do charge John Mickleborough with having stabbed me with intent to kill and murder me." (From the Ipswich Journal)³

There were some efforts by the defence to ask the jury to consider if John was in any fit state to be responsible for his actions. *"Mr. Prendergast made a long and eloquent speech to the Jury, in which he contended that the prisoner was of unsound mind; that his mother had been insane, and had died from a disease of the brain, and that his conduct had been most strange on many occasions, and clearly indicative of madness."* (Bury and Norwich Post)⁴

However, the outcome was: *"The sentence of the Court is, that for this offence you be taken from hence to the place of confinement from whence you came, and from thence to a place of execution, and that you be there hanged by the neck until you be dead; and that your body be buried within the precincts of the prison, within which you shall be confined after your conviction; and may the Lord have mercy on your soul!"* (Ipswich Journal)⁵

John's wife, Frances, fought against the sentence of death, which was respited to transportation. (One newspaper report indicates that he was transported and when released returned to this country.)

John's incarceration left Francis unable to cope as a widow with 3 young children and responsibility for the business. An appeal for financial help produced £102 7s. 6d.

In and around the 1850s, transportation, although still a punishment, was in the decline as it was so costly, so there was

some doubt as to whether John actually left the country. The Prison Commission Records gives considerable information, including that he was not deported.

Prison Commission Records: *“Reg. No. 1662; Name: John Mickleburgh; Age: 42; Status: married, 3 children; Literacy: imperfect, not intelligent; Occupation: farmer; Crime: murder, 20th Mar 1852, assizes at Bury St. Edmunds; Sentence: life; Committal: 4th August 1851, Thrandeston, Suffolk; Separate confinement: Millbank, 14m 21d; Conduct: Ipswich, good, Millbank, good; Family: Thrandeston, Suffolk; Previous: no previous convictions, never transported, general character good but addicted to drinking, formerly a private soldier in the 16th Regt. Foot 3 years discharged about 20 years ago; Religion: established church; Prisons: Millbank, 19th Aug 1852, 9m 29d, Portsmouth, 8th Nov 1853, 1y 7m 19d, good conduct; Disposal: invalided to Dartmoor, 5th Sep 1854.”*⁶

(No definitive record of John’s military career has been found but there is an 1841 reference to a so named person as service number 611, private, 57th Foot, in Fort St. George & Trichinopoly, Madras, India.)

After his transfer to Dartmoor, from the Attested Lists of the Convict Prison⁷ from 1855 to 1867, John is shown as having poor health or as an invalid and showing very good behaviour. The last entry in the first quarter of 1868 notes his transfer to Millbank, in preparation for his release on licence, (ticket-of-leave) on 6th Mar 1868.

Even though no record of a divorce was found (was one needed?), Francis married Edgar Nunn; the 1861 Census⁸ showing her living at Great Green, Thrandeston, aged 58, with husband Edgar (54, farmer of 32 acres employing a labourer), and daughters Frances Mickleburgh (17, milliner) and Kate (15, dressmaker).

In 1871, John, now a 61-year-old agricultural worker, was living in Diss Road, Shelfanger, as a boarder in the household⁹ of Mary Read (67, farmer employing 2 men and 1 boy).

With the occupation of carpenter and wheelwright, John appears in the 1881 Census¹⁰ as aged 72, born in Gissing, and living alone in Rectory Road, ***Shelfanger***.

Eventually John became an inmate of the Kenninghall Workhouse; he was on the 1881 Census in Shelfanger, so probably entered sometime between 1882 and 1888. It is said that he was never allowed to enter Suffolk after the murder.

On the 19th February, 1888, John, now an infirmed old man suffering from bronchitis, was in the sick ward. There he was severely beaten by John Revell Burrows, a temporary orderly on the ward. He later died on 1st Mar 1888.

At the inquest, "Mr. J. W. Wilson, surgeon, said he examined the deceased and found evidence of bruising and extensive tenderness over the chest. Burrows denied that he had hit him. Witness was of opinion that the blow accelerated death." (Ipswich Journal)¹¹

Later Burrows was convicted of manslaughter.

This was not the first fatality at the workhouse. "One of the inmates of the sick ward Jonas Rivett after all had retired to rest on the night of February 12th, 1887, rose from his bed, made his way to the room in which one of the attendants - Henry Baker - slept, and stabbed him in the neck with a knife as he lay, completely severing the jugular vein and inflicting such injuries that the poor victim died soon afterwards. The murderer, who was 71 years of age, was finally tried before Mr, Justice Field at the Assizes at Ipswich, on June 21st, and, although the plea of insanity was set up in defence, the death

sentence was imposed upon him. However, he was afterwards reprieved.” (Ipswich Journal)¹²

..... and so, several hours later, this short account of the murder of Sarah Baker, and the subsequent murder of her murderer, has materialised. At the time this whole affair created considerable interest and can be found reported in many newspapers both locally and nationally. The Diss Family History Group webpages contain transcripts of a number of the reports and can be found at:

<https://www.tharston-past.info/DFHG/Local/THRA/ThrandestonInfo.html>

More information and greater detail from the transcripts will be found via the above webpage and anyone with additional information and is willing to share it with us will be welcomed.

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- ¹ 1841 National Census : (HO107 Piece 1024 Book 12 Folio 9 Page 12 Schedule 1075)
 - ² 1851 National Census : (HO107 Piece 1795 Folio 618 Page 1 Schedule 2)
 - ³ The Ipswich Journal, Saturday, 9 Aug 1851, Page 4
 - ⁴ The Bury and Norwich Post, Friday, 2 Mar 1888, page 5
 - ⁵ The Ipswich Journal, Saturday, 27 Mar 1852, Page 2
 - ⁶ *Home Office and Prison Commission: Prisons Records, Series 1*. Kew, Surrey, England: The National Archives.
 - ⁷ Ancestry : Criminal Lunatic Asylum Registers, 1820-1876
 - ⁸ 1861 National Census : (RG09 Piece 1150 Folio 163 Page 3 Schedule 16)
 - ⁹ 1871 National Census : (RG10 Piece 1838 Folio 144 Page 6 Schedule 42)
 - ¹⁰ 1881 National Census : (RG11 Piece 1971 Folio 127 Page 12 Schedule 879)
 - ¹¹ The Ipswich Journal, Tuesday, 6 Mar 1888, Page 8
 - ¹² The Bury and Norwich Post, Friday, 2 Mar 1888, page 5