

The Lopham Project

Criminals and Miscreants



George FORTIS
(1770 – 1822)

Nick Woods

This story is part of the Diss Family History Group's project looking at the history of the villages of North and South Lopham.

Many thanks go to Nick Woods for sharing this story.

More information on the project can be found on the D.F.H.G.'s [webpages](#).

The cover picture is a painting of the Agrarian Rioters in 1830, source unknown.

George FORTIS sen. was the baseborn son of Susanna, baptised on April 15 1770 at St Nicholas Church, North Lopham. On October 12 1788 George FORTIS sen. married Mary RUDLAND (Rutland / Rudling / Rudland / Rudnell) at St Nicholas Church, North Lopham. He was 18 and Mary was 19.

They had at least 12 children in North Lopham, Diss and Hinderclay between 1789-1812.

Our subject was their 4th. child, George jnr., who was born and baptised in North Lopham in February 1794. He possibly married twice, firstly to Mary BARHAM who likely died in 1819, then secondly as a widower to Frances FISK in 1820 at Bressingham, and is believed to have had at least 4 children including a boy George and a William. It is likely he was living in Bressingham by 1820.

Although George's father was educated enough to write his name on his marriage certificate in 1788 instead of a X, family life in rural North Lopham, like many other places, must have been very hard. Successive bad harvests in the 1790's meant agricultural workers suffered greatly with little work and poor pay. Bread prices soared and the poor of the district were badly affected by food shortages. Mobs of people roamed the district causing trouble. Some rioted and troops were mobilised to quell public disorder, which was made worse by war with France in 1793 and again in 1802.

The introduction of Methodism, new agricultural machinery and the soon to be introduced land enclosure laws, only made the situation worse. Times were so hard for rural folk, that many out of work men signed up for military service and George FORTIS jnr. made the decision

along with several of his kinsmen to join up and fought at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 with the Royal Staff Corps. His friend Noah PEAK from Shelfanger fought in the earlier Peninsular Wars of Busaco in 1810 and Albuera in 1811.

When the men returned to Norfolk the wars were over, but the hardships remained, because now there were too many men for too few jobs. People were rioting for want of food and many suffered with painful losses of liberty and dignity, living at subsistence level for service in a cash economy.

Dissent erupted in The Lophams after 1815 when local people started damaging the fencing of enclosed land. Four local people were indicted and imprisoned from 3-12 months each and it was clear law and order was slowly breaking down. Corn and Poor Laws disabled the working class further, public disorder was breaking out all over the district, machine breaking and arson (incendiarism) was widespread heaping more misery on people who already had little work and little to eat.

Although George FORTIS jnr. found some employment on the roads under the surveyor of Bressingham, he had little to share with his family and like many of his ilk resorted to poaching.

Into this heady mix of social unrest George FORTIS jnr. found himself mixed up with roving gangs of men and women who vented their anger by breaking agricultural machinery and setting fire to hayricks. Many felt powerless, but there was little else they could do to vent their anger, because the poor had so little recourse in a society that didn't care. This period became known as the Agrarian Riots of 1822.

In February 1822 George FORTIS jnr. and Noah PEAK from Shelfanger were probably among a 100+ rioters who had assembled at Kenninghall, seizing the threshing machine of a farmer called Mr Bailey. The riot was only quelled when a local justice of the peace and other farmers at a nearby auction arrived to read the Riot Act. In March, more trouble erupted at farms at Shropham, Attleborough, Banham, Buckenham and at Mr DOGGETT's farm at Winfarthing.

The Eye Troop of Yeomanry Cavalry had to be called out. Incendiarism was rife and eight men deemed as 'ring-leaders' were secured and sent to Thetford Assizes, then Norwich Castle and Bridewell prisons under escort. The Cavalry, West Norfolk Militia, 16th. Lancers and Norwich Light Horse volunteers were often mobbed and stoned by unruly city and country folk and even when the militia were dispersed to police local 'hot-spots' the trouble and violence continued unabated.

In all over 120 men appeared before the local courts in connection with the agrarian disturbances of 1822, from dozens of Norfolk and Suffolk villages. Most received prison sentences, some were fined, a few even transported. But two men from South Norfolk suffered the full force of the law that year, after another prisoner turned King's evidence and implicated the accused, even though they 'admitted to being privy to the deeds, but not applying the fire'.

This was probably a William BAKER who was deemed to be the main instigator of trouble at Winfarthing and was indicted for trial for arson with the threat of execution, but he implicated others and received an 18 month prison sentence instead.

George FORTIS and Noah PEAK were indicted for arson (incendiarism) for setting fire to 3 haystacks on February 25 1822. These were probably the property of John KENT, farmer from Diss.

They were hanged at Castle Hill Norwich in a public execution on April 13 1822. Although some reports quote the place of execution as Thetford. George FORTIS jnr. was 28 and Noah PEAK was 40 years old. Both left wives and young families.

Nick Woods

Addendum:

Noah PEAK was the sixth child of seven to William PEAK and Ann TAYLOR of Shelfanger. He was baptised at All Saints Shelfanger January 6 1782.

For those wishing to study the 1822 and 1831 Local Agrarian Riots in more detail, I came across the following Norfolk and Suffolk men who were named as indicted:

Imprisoned - Robert Chatton, James Goddard, James Crick, James Caley, Messrs. Dixon, Ellsey and Coleman. William Baker, John Wink, Wiliam Riches, William Forman, Cornelius Goose, James Reeve and Messrs. Platten, Randle, Whittaker, Stokes, Peters, Henry Howard and the Jeffries brothers from Eye later in 1831, during which up to 10 other people were transported.

17 year old William Aldous from Suffolk was the youngest to be executed from the Suffolk 1822 assizes.

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