

PARISH FUGITIVE TO LORD OF THE MANOR



Anybody in the Banbury area who needs medical treatment that requires hospitalisation is admitted to the Horton. But why, ‘Horton?’ Why not Banbury, North Oxfordshire or Cherwell? The answer lies in the name of a man who was an outstanding entrepreneur and industrialist of his time.

William Horton was baptised at St Mary de Castro Parish Church in Leicester on the 19th April 1744. His father, Joseph Horton who was Church Warden to the incumbent, Reverend Thomas Pocklington, gave his occupation in the parish register as Maltster (i.e. Brewer); his mother was not named. Research has revealed that Joseph’s first wife and the mother of all his children was Sarah Howis who was six years older than him. Their first child, Jane, was born in March 1740 – two months before the couple married at Shepshed in Leicestershire. Unfortunately Jane died at the age of ten. William was the eldest surviving son, followed by Joseph (bap. 1745), Elizabeth (1749), John (1751), Charles (1753) and Sarah (bap. not known). However, Sarah, Joseph’s wife, died in March 1763 and he re-married four months later, to Mary Drakelow. The three youngest children were under the age of twelve so it must have been important to find them a step-mother. A Will written in February 1769, just three weeks before Joseph died, refers to his second wife Mary and his six surviving children. William’s father appears to have been a relatively prosperous citizen, records show him to have been a Freeman of the Borough of Leicester, renting land in the parish and disputing the rent he was expected to pay! Joseph was also involved in public affairs and held the responsible position of Sergeant at Mace for the town Mayor.

William was educated at Hinckley, probably at the Grammar School where no doubt he lived in trepidation of his forbidding headmaster, John Dalby who has been described as, ‘tall of stature and well proportioned and in his school kept up a proper order and subordination among his scholars as they advanced in learning. His casting a look over the school was observed with awe and silence’. There must have been a fairly small number of pupils (the school room was only fifteen feet wide by twenty-five feet long) and the school was commonly referred to as a ‘Free Schoole’ but it is possible that fees were paid. Lessons included the use of the dictionary, Latin, Greek and Arithmetic. During this time the school was seriously beginning to decline. These were the years that began the industrial revolution in England, and while the country was changing rapidly, the Grammar School refused to move with the times and rejected a change in the curriculum to bring it more into line with the age. In an area where the hosiery industry was developing rapidly the school continued to teach the classics with the result that its status quickly diminished.

William may have worked with his father for a number of years - he did not start a seven year apprenticeship with his uncle, John Horton a Blacksmith, until 1765 when he had reached the age of twenty-one. This was relatively late, as most apprentices would have started their training at fourteen. William would have been expected to faithfully serve his Master, keep his secrets and gladly carry out his lawful commands. He was not allowed to play at cards, dice or unlawful games, nor could he haunt Taverns or

Playhouses. As well as teaching him his trade and paying a weekly wage, his uncle had to provide his nephew with Meat, Drink, Clothes and Lodging. In 1771 the apprenticeship was transferred to Isaac Colnet and William was released from the Blacksmiths' Company in the City of London in February 1772. Both of William's Masters are known to have worked in the Bethnal Green area, they were active members of the Company and are mentioned in the records of the Court of Wardens between 1775 and 1781 in their roles of either Warden or Assistants. The Blacksmith's Company, in common with other City Guilds, required their apprentices to produce a 'proof piece' to demonstrate their skill as craftsmen before their admission to freedom, William would have been no exception. Boys from the countryside were recruited, as they were fitter and stronger than their town counterparts - being accustomed to fresh air and a healthier diet.

As a young and possibly irresponsible man, William was obliged to abandon an unknown young lady of his acquaintance who found herself in an unfortunate predicament. He hurriedly left his hometown, -

'Through an error common to young men who, sooner than enter a state of matrimony, chose to fly from the parish officers.'

The Apprenticeship could have been seen as a convenient way out of his 'predicament' (as already stated) - a condition of service was to preclude marriage whilst serving a Master. At that time the father of an illegitimate child could either have been sent to prison by the magistrate or made to pay a sum of money until the child was of an age to be apprenticed or put to work. Of course, the other alternative was marriage but William does not appear to have regarded this as an option.

We don't know why he settled in Chacombe, although the availability of work was no doubt a deciding factor. However, there is evidence that his younger brother, Joseph, had also moved to the village where he married a local girl – Hannah, daughter of John Heritage, a Baker, on the 18th of November 1767 at the village church of St. Peter and St Paul. The witnesses were Thomas Heritage and Wyatt Hancock, a Framework Knitter. The couple settled in the nearby village of Middleton Cheney and a daughter, Jane was baptised on 28th October 1769. It is interesting to note that Joseph was subject to an Examination to the place of his Legal Settlement in April 1769. The document states that Joseph had been required under oath to verify that he was born in the parish of St. Mary in Leicester and that he was about twenty-three years old. He confirmed that ten years previously he had been apprenticed to a John Gardner, Framework Knitter, of the same parish for seven years. Joseph lived with his Master for about three and a half years and then bought out his time (this would have coincided with the death of his mother and the possible inheritance of the financial means to end his apprenticeship). The examination confirms that Joseph, 'Hath done nothing whereby to gain a Settlement in any other parish or place, save in the parish of St Mary aforesaid'. Joseph was obviously successful in gaining a Settlement Certificate in order to stay in Middleton Cheney as his daughter was christened in All Saints Church five months later.



The growth of the hosiery industry in this area had been accelerated by the Enclosures Acts of the 1760s when many unemployed agricultural labourers turned to the knitting of hose for employment. William commenced employment in the village as a Stocking-

Frame Repairer and Setter-Up; it is certain that he developed an intimate knowledge of the principle and working of the machines. An enterprising young man, he was driven by a consuming passion to modify and enhance the process of making silk stockings. William was convinced that he could improve and speed up production and his ultimate aim was to produce an elastic and sound fabric.

Working a stocking frame required considerable physical effort, both from the operator's hands and arms, which moved the carriage; and from the feet and legs, which moved the treadles. Good sight was also needed as the machine required frequent adjustment. A flat piece of material was produced, which could be widened or narrowed to follow the shape of the leg. This basic shape was then seamed up to form a fully-fashioned stocking. Women usually undertook the seaming, whereas the strenuous exertion required to operate the frame was usually the man's job. Children or women wound the thread from hanks or bobbins. Framework knitting, as it came to be called, was therefore a cottage industry in which all the family participated and one that could be carried out at home since only muscle power, was needed.

Confirmation of the flourishing trade in the village of Middleton Cheney is indicated by the following advertisement which appeared in the Northampton Mercury on the 15th July 1771-

‘Wanted immediately, near twenty JOURNEYMEN FRAMEWORK-KNITTERS in the SILK BRANCH. Such, by applying to the Masters of that Trade in Middleton Cheney in the County of Northampton, may have constant Employ on the best of Work. The Prices are, for 28 Hole 3s. 9d, for 26 ditto 3s, for 24 ditto 2s 6d to the journeymen’.

However, life for the apprentices was not always easy and a number ran away from their Masters. Other news cuttings tell their own story –

‘21st June 1768 – STEPHEN BARREL run away from his Master, William Burges, Frame-work Knitter, at Middleton Cheney... Whoever shall employ or harbour this said Apprentice, shall be punished to the utmost Severity of the Law: But whoever shall bring this said Stephen Barrell to his said Master, shall, for their Reward, receive a Faggot of old broken Needles, from WILLIAM BURGES.’

‘27th September 1779 - WHEREAS WILLIAM PEARCEY, Frame-Work Knitter, left his Master, Richard Lock, of Middleton Cheney... and took from his said Master a Shirt, a red Waistcoat, a pair of Leather Breeches, a Pair or two of odd Silk-Hose... If the said William Pearcey offers the above Silk Hose to sale, and any person will give information thereof to Richard Lock, so that he may be brought to Justice, shall be well rewarded for the same, by me’.

Other Masters appear to have been less concerned with bringing down the full force of the law on an absconding apprentice, as the following cutting will testify –

‘WHEREAS THOMAS BERREY, of Middleton Cheney ELOPED from his Master's Service on the 18th August 1794, and has not since been heard of.

Whoever will give information of him to Mr Thos. Penn of Middleton Cheney, his said Master; or to Elizabeth Berrey, his Mother, of the same place, it will be esteemed a favour, and FIVE SHILLINGS Reward will be given:- Or if the said Thos. Berrey will return to his Master, he will be kindly received; or send to his Mother to let her know where he is, it will be a great Comfort. The said Thos. Berrey is about 17 Years of Age, 5 Feet 3 Inches high, dark hair and eyes, and has a seam on the upper lip. – Had on when he went away, a brown drab coloured coat and waistcoat and leather breeches.’

William’s finances were low while he worked in his spare time to construct a new frame, capable of producing the improved stockings that he felt would make his fortune. Financial disaster threatened when he was delivering a new, ordinary stocking frame to a client by packhorse. The frame was insecurely tied to the animal’s back and was severely damaged resulting in the loss of its value, an estimated twenty pounds (equivalent to about eight hundred pounds in today’s money). William was in total despair and considered another clandestine removal to escape the claims of his creditors. However, a friend assisted him with the money and in the spring of 1772 he went to live at the great seat of fashion – London, where he succeeded in finishing his modified frame.

Soon after arriving in the city William’s new invention impressed a hosier, Richard March (or Marsh), who became his patron and they set up a partnership together at 12 Newgate Street, not far from St Paul’s Cathedral. During the next seven years the partners took out a number of patents for machines which were capable of producing stocking and breeches pieces; and gloves of silk, linen, cotton and worsted.

In 1776 the silk stockings produced by Horton, Marsh and Co. were described as, ‘...the most beautiful and durable stockings ever made by human hands’.



Evidently by 1797 the demand was so great that, ‘a thousand silk knotted frames could furnish but a scanty supply’. It is recorded that, ‘most excellent and durable articles were made’ and that the partners supplied, ‘...the Nobility and Gentry,’ with outstanding quality goods, ‘...much cheaper than the French’. The partners could also provide wide lace for dress gowns, shades, cloaks, handkerchiefs, aprons and ruffles.

The registering of patents did not always prevent illegal copying and on one occasion an agent from another firm in Nottingham pirated William’s latest invention and fled to Scotland. William sent his brother to investigate the rival manufacturer with disastrous results for the family. His brother is reported to have died, from the consequences of a severe cold caught on his journey north and back.

Life in London in the eighteenth century was not without its’ difficulties and William’s premises in Newgate Street must have been involved in the riots that took place in that part of the city in the summer of 1782.

‘During the first week of June the mob was, for several days in the possession of London On Tuesday evening, Newgate (Prison) was broken open, the prisoners to the number of 300 released, and the building, lately rebuilt at a cost of £140,000, reduced to a heap of charred ruins. There were scenes of unbridled drunkenness and savagery, fire and

destruction were widespread. ... Resentment against the inactivity of the authorities was widespread. And it was stated that 'Kennett the Lord Mayor displayed a great dereliction of duty, for which he was afterwards prosecuted and convicted'.

However the troubled times do need seem to have had an adverse effect on William and his partners, the firm expanded in subsequent years and in 1790 they set up further establishments at Middleton Cheney, Chacombe, Nottingham and Godalming in Surrey. William increased the size of two of his frames which greatly excited the Surrey workmen who named them Gog and Magog, however they refused to work a cloth on them greater than thirty-six inches wide. Until, that is, a giant of a man called James Whitehorn stepped forward to take up the challenge. He worked Magog for over twenty years; making fleecy great coats upon it and driving it faster than ordinary hands could work the normal size frames. The frames at Godalming specialised in fleecy underclothing, particularly for use by sufferers from gout and rheumatism. It is not known if William Horton had a personal interest in these items! Other products included muff linings, bootikins and coach carpeting.

On the 12th August 1777 William married Elizabeth Sufflee, the only child and heiress of Peter Sufflee and Elizabeth (nee Jourdain), a merchant of Hoxton Square in Middlesex. The wedding took place at St Leonards Church, Shoreditch. Appropriately, in William's case, the bells are commemorated in the rhyme 'Oranges and Lemons'... "When I grow rich, say the bells of Shoreditch."

William continued to progress professionally and on the 26th of July 1792 was appointed Master-Warden of the Blacksmiths' Company of London, thus following in the footsteps of his two Masters who had also held respected positions in the Company. On appointment he had to take an oath of allegiance, which commenced,

'I, William Horton do solemnly swear that I have been chosen to be Keeper or Warden of the Art or Mystery de lez Blacksmith's London'.

Wardens were nominated and elected by the Company and were men of high character who carried out their duties with strict justice and charity. The Warden was responsible for the binding of apprentices, settling quarrels, levying fines and granting leases.

Six years later he had amassed a vast fortune and purchased the Chetwode estate at Warkworth and Grimsbury near Banbury, no doubt choosing this area as his progress to great wealth had started here. He also had a town house in Highbury, then on the outskirts of London. This was a very desirable area where new and elegant houses were built for wealthy residents in the eighteenth century. A further, seaside residence at Cliftonville in Brighton and an estate at Brentwood in Essex were additional family assets.

At this time William and Elizabeth were also increasing the size of their family. Their first child, a daughter named after her mother was born in (circa) 1778, followed by a son, Joseph named after his grandfather in © 1780. A further six children were born - Sarah © 1782, Ann © 1783, William © 1785, Mary Ann © 1790 and Henry George © 1759. Another son, John was born sometime between 1785 and 1795 but died in infancy.

In 1807 William Horton & Son were established as Manufacturers of British Lace and Silk Hosiery in Russia Court, Milk Street (not far from St Paul's Cathedral). The location

of the business is important as it was conveniently situated near to the Bell and Crown Inn at Holborn. This was the Banbury / London Stage Coach link, the journey could be completed in one day, for a fare of 16 shillings – half price to outside passengers!

William was noted as a man of untiring industry and although he had realised a handsome fortune was, at an advanced age, still to be seen repairing and improving his frames with all the meticulous attention of his younger days. He is reported to have been remarkable for his simplicity of tastes and habits and venerable for his years. He lived to see the coming of the age of machinery to his particular industry with the initial accompanying improvements to pay and working conditions for hand-loom weavers in this trade. An early census of Middleton Cheney highlights the importance of the textile trade in this area with the following occupations among those listed;- 10 Framework Knitters, 20 Plush Weavers, 6 Weavers, a Wool-Stapler (i.e. a person who grades wool) and a Wool-Carder.

In his book, ‘The History of Banbury’ Alfred Beesley recalls –

‘At Middleton and Chacombe there is a considerable manufacture of the finest kind of silk stockings. William Horton Esq. the inventor of the elastic knotted hose, resided in his younger years at Chacombe, and worked there as a Framesmith.’

There is no evidence that William ever resided in Middleton Cheney, or the nearby town of Banbury after he had purchased the Chetwode Estate, however he certainly had at least one Agent acting on his behalf in the village. In his Will he left all his, ‘Frames in Middleton Cheney to my friend William Banwell’. William had married Sarah Spratt in the village church on August 1789 and they subsequently named their fourth surviving child, and first son, Joseph Horton Banwell (bap. 18/11/1804). The two men appear to have a valued friendship that went beyond the bounds of a purely professional relationship.

The death of William Horton in 1833 and the subsequent ending of his business, together with the demise of the cottage industry, severely affected the livelihood of those connected with silk weaving in Middleton Cheney. This is clearly illustrated in an extract from a letter written to a relative who had emigrated to Sydney, Australia.

‘Middleton Cheney, June 8th 1834 - ...I hav had many trials since you left, myself it is 2 years last witsentide since I had any regular work I have got (now) 5 children and ye Raskley parish would not alow me more then 8s per week for my work therefore you will easely know my situation... Wm Horton Junr died & ye old Gent laid by bisness & his grandson took ye same but when we lost Wm. Hor. we lost all in a short time after ye Old (Boy Died) ye was both interd at (ye) time in there Family valt. Dear Unkel you may consider (as you no doubt do) yourself one of ye luckeyst men in ye world that you ave got away from this most tring part of ye Globe & I pray that God may be with you & yours where ever you be or wherever you go’

The demise of the silk stocking industry in Middleton was also recalled by George Herbert (1814-1902) in his book, ‘The Shoemaker’s Window,’ –

‘The silk-stocking making used to be largely carried on in Middleton Cheney by the Hortons. Since I can remember there was a loom in most of the cottages for the purpose, and now there is not one.’

An epitaph to another eighteenth century Blacksmith that is inscribed on a tombstone in the churchyard of St Nicholas, Sutton Surrey could also commemorate William Horton:

My sledge and hammer lie declined
 My bellows too have lost their wind
 My Fire’s extinct, my forge decayed
 And in the dust my vice is laid
 My coals are spent, my iron gone
 My nails are drove, my work is done
 My fire-dries corpse here lies at rest
 My soul smoke-like soars to be blest.

William Horton and his wife, Elizabeth died within two days of each other, they had been married for fifty-six years. Their long and happy life together was a remarkable achievement in an era when one in five marriages would not have lasted ten years, due to the death of a partner. Four brothers and sisters had died some years before their parents and the last two sons, William Jnr. and Henry George passed away in 1831 and 1846 respectively. None of the sons married. The family were buried in a family tomb at the Chapel of Ease, Holloway in London. William Horton’s fortune eventually passed to his last remaining daughter, Mary Ann, a spinster, who also inherited the title and became Lady of the Manor of Middleton Cheney. She built herself a large Manor House known as The Holt in the village. This house was demolished some years ago although the much-altered gatehouse and coach-house remain.

Mary Ann was known for her good works for the poor of the village, especially the children. School records note the gift of clothing for less fortunate children on a number of occasions. She was also responsible for the almshouses being built in 1863 – originally for the workers on her estate. Mary Ann generously contributed to the extensive repairs and restorations to the parish church in 1865, which were carried out under the supervision of George Gilbert Scott Esq. R.A., the Victorian Architect whose works included the Albert Memorial in London.



It would appear that in spite of all her charitable works within the area Mary Ann was a lonely lady who mourned the loss of her parents, brothers and sisters. As the last surviving member of the family who had done so much for the people of Middleton Cheney she took the unusual step of erecting a Gothic tomb in All Saint’s churchyard, and in November 1865 she arranged for the bodies of her family to be disinterred and brought to the village where their coffins were placed in the new vault. As the building of the Horton Tomb coincided with the work on the church there is a distinct possibility that George Gilbert Scott was consulted on its design. The Reverend William Buckley conducted the burial and a large number of village people were present. In fact the School Mistress, Miss Mary Ayres, recorded that many children were absent on the afternoon of November 17th, ‘to witness the internment’.

Ironically Mary Ann, having moved the bodies of her family nearer to her country residence, died herself four years later aged 79 at her house in Highbury, London. Her body was brought to Middleton and she was buried with her family eight days later. The Banbury Advertiser printed the suitably moral, Victorian entry on Thursday 22nd July 1869, -

‘Few there are who have left behind them such noble and enduring monuments of benevolence of heart as she whose loss we this day deplore. Go to the village... (Middleton Cheney), and there evidence may be seen on every hand of her wish to promote the comforts of the poor... But in her death the living have a lesson, - “Go ye, and do likewise!”

Mary Ann bequeathed the money for the erection of a hospital in Banbury and there is some evidence to suggest that she was influenced in her decision to found a hospital by her doctor, C.L.H. Pemberton, who was to become the hospital's first Honorary Physician and a member of the Committee of Management. Miss Horton purchased an 8 acre site for £3,000 and added £7,000 to build the hospital. Work had started when she died on 19 July 1869, aged 80. Her heir was her nephew John Henry Kolle, a horse hair manufacturer of London who assumed the name of Horton, as stipulated in Mary Ann's Will. A codicil of Miss Horton's will, dated 11 March 1869, ensured that he continued with the building of the hospital. However, he only survived his aunt by three months and, after his death on 11 October 1869, the responsibility was taken on by his son John Henry Horton of Park House, Upper Tooting, Surrey.

The infirmary was originally intended for the poor of Banbury and those living within a ten-mile radius. It was built by Franklin's of Deddington and opened on July 17th 1872, with the provision that there would always be one bed available for a resident of Middleton Cheney. Local doctors carried out all the treatments and operated a rota for emergencies until first resident house surgeon was appointed in 1926. (Mary Ann Horton's Will totalled £70,000 – the equivalent of nearly three million pounds today).

In the 1990s the Horton Tomb had sadly deteriorated and a fund raising appeal was successfully carried out in the village to renovate the memorial. The cost of the restoration? - £10,000, the amount it had taken to build the original Horton Infirmary in Banbury.



FURTHER READING

- Framework Knitting - Marilyn Palmer (1984)
- Hinckley Grammar School Foundation – A History to Commemorate the Centennial Celebrations – D. Startin (1977)
- History of Banbury - Alfred Beesley (pub.1841)
- History of Machine Wrought Hosiery and Lace Manufactures - William Felkins (1867)
- History of Nottingham – John Blackner (1815)
- History of the Framework Knitters - Gravenor Henson (1831)

History of the Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths – Arthur Adams (1951)
Shoemaker's Window - George Herbert (1948)
Victorian Banbury - Barrie Trinder (1982)

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