

PETTICOAT POWER

There's a tendency, I find, for historical research to lead from one thing to another. You start off by delving into one aspect of the past, and then you come across another interesting subject. Readers of this column may recall, a couple of months ago, a brief mention of a lady with the unusual name of Mrs Parker Sedding. A little bit of digging revealed that she was worthy of a longer look.

We're perhaps inclined to think that female emancipation began with women's lib in the 1960s, or maybe with the suffragette movement. But throughout history there have been strong women prepared to buck the stereotypes. Parker Sedding was one of these.

She was born Parker Thomson in Lincoln in 1742. We know little about her early life, but in 1786 she was married in London to Dorney farmer Edmund Sedding. The Sedding family were long established in Dorney and presumably Edmund brought his new wife back there to live. There is no indication that Parker had much previous experience of farming, but when her husband died only three years later, she took over the running of the farm.

Parker was still living in Dorney in 1799, but before 1803 she had moved to Baylis Farm in Stoke Poges. This was a substantial rented farm generating income of over £400 a year and she was described as one of the best farmers in the neighbourhood. At this time, parish affairs were run by worthy locals who took turns to hold the unpaid positions of churchwarden, overseer of the poor and surveyor of highways. Almost always these functions were carried out by men, but as a widow Parker was eligible for election, and so she became overseer of the poor for Stoke Poges, with the support of former Lord Chancellor the Earl of Rosslyn who was living at Baylis House and the vicar George Bold.

It was unusual enough for a woman to fill the role of overseer, but Parker brought her own unique approach to the job. Energetic and compassionate and surely ahead of her time, she decided the best way to find out what was going on in the workhouse was to live there herself for a month. She found "*the interior of the workhouse was irregular and dirty, and the poor inhabitants of it filthy and idle*". So, she got the inmates to clean the building and themselves, and then organised for them proper clothing, bedding and nutrition. She left the workhouse in the care of a couple she had hired as managers who could also give lessons to the children, hold prayer and bible readings, and teach spinning. Parker was keen to set up a small factory producing worsted cloth where the inmates could work, partly to pay for their keep but also so that they could earn some money for themselves. When the parish vestry refused to pay for this, Parker organised and paid for it herself. Not only did she transform conditions in the workhouse, she managed to pay off the arrears of debt owed by the parish and reduce the rates paid by parishioners to support the poor.

This remarkable performance was held up as a shining example, both at the time and afterwards, most recently in publications about "petticoat politicians" – women involved in politics in the nineteenth century. Nor did Parker forget the poor of her late husband's parish. She left £200 to add to a charity established by an earlier Sedding widow, to help poor people in Dorney, especially widows. Her gift to provide food and clothes for deserving poor widows in Stoke Poges still, today, forms part of the Stoke Poges United Charity helping people in need, and she also gave funds for education there. Like many modern-day philanthropists, Parker made these charitable donations during her lifetime.

Sometime between 1817 and 1825, Parker moved again, to live with her nephew Richard Thompson at Farnham Court farm in Farnham Royal and she remained there till her death in 1827. Richard and his wife Susanna had one daughter, Caroline, born in 1815. Here I found another connection with Dorney. In 1849, Caroline married the widowed Philip Palmer, youngest son of Charles Palmer of Dorney Court and 15 years her senior. They

lived at Oakley Place in Bray with Philip's son John, but sadly Caroline died in 1854. Parker had left most of her estate to Richard, but it appears he had failed to administer her will before his death in 1848. It was left to Philip Palmer's son John in 1887 to administer the wills of both his stepmother Caroline Palmer and her great aunt Parker Sedding.

Parker Sedding also left money to her niece Parker Thompson, Richard's sister. Born in Ely in 1776, Parker Thompson too had migrated to the area near Dorney. I discovered that by 1810 she was working in the household of Caroline Lockman, the spinster daughter of John Lockman, who had been a Canon of Windsor from 1759 to 1807 when he died. Caroline Lockman was still living in Windsor Castle in 1814, but by 1828 had moved into a house on what is now St Leonard's Road. She had a small close-knit staff of women (and a footman) who regarded her as their "dear mistress" for whom they held "great respect and regard". When they died in her service, they were buried in St George's chapel or in a vault at the parish church, and when Caroline Lockman died in June 1828 she left her servants a year's wages, on top of other bequests which for those who had been with her for many years were very generous. Parker Thompson was given an annuity of £100, a lump sum of £200, and much of the furniture and household items. Parker must have been a senior servant, perhaps the housekeeper or ladies' maid, because she was also entrusted with the care of Caroline Lockman's young protegee, a teenage girl in delicate health, who lived with them. Caroline left funds for her upkeep and education, envisaging a career as a governess or teacher. Strangely, the girl's parents were alive and not poor, so it is unclear why Caroline felt it important that the girl should be allowed to live where she chose and to exclude the parents from decisions about their daughter's future. One elderly servant who had worked for the Lockman family for 57 years described herself as being under Caroline's "protection", so perhaps Caroline provided an element of refuge from domestic abuse.

In fact, Parker Thompson died less than a month after her mistress. She had kept in contact with her Sedding relations, and she left money and religious books to her niece Caroline Thompson.

In the days before the NHS, social security and state schools, provision of welfare, health and education was supported by charities. Caroline Lockman was a benefactor to several of these in Windsor, including charities to help the poor working classes and poor women in childbirth. She was a "valuable friend" to the organisation which had set up and was running the first schools to provide systematic teaching for the children of the poor, and she left money to that "excellent institution" the Windsor General Dispensary. Forerunner of the King Edward VII hospital, this offered medical treatment to the sick of Windsor, Eton and the vicinity who could not afford to pay for care. During the current pandemic, we can appreciate that the dispensary offered smallpox vaccination free to everyone and in the 1820s even encouraged uptake by the offer of a shilling to each person vaccinated – an idea for our times perhaps? Following in her spirit of philanthropy, Caroline's servants also left money to charities, including poor widows and widowers in the almshouses.

These women may not have exercised power in the way they might have been able to today, but they used what means they had to influence and to improve the lives of other women.

Virginia Silvester