

WORKHOUSE: Part 2 by Virginia Silvester

In the first part of this examination of Dorney people in the workhouse in 1881, we saw how poverty drove two elderly farm workers, one widowed and one single, to end their lives as inmates. This second part looks at a rather different situation which exposes some surprising goings-on in our quiet village!

Ann Holman was a married woman said to be aged 85 when the census recorded her in Eton Union Workhouse in 1881. She was born Ann Middleton about 1800 and she married John Holman in Dorney in 1819. The following year she gave birth to a daughter, but the baby lived only 2 days. There were no more children.

On the face of it, John Holman was a respectable local man. He worked as a shoemaker and for many years he was the parish clerk at Dorney church. Reportedly he owned cottages in Burnham and Cippenham. In 1841 and 1851 John and Ann were living in Lake End, where John also kept a beerhouse, called The Cricketers. At the 1851 census they had 4 guests staying, straw drawers who had come from villages further north where straw plaiting to make hats was an important cottage industry.

The story of what happened next was exposed in newspaper reports of a court case in September 1860. Witness accounts vary, but things started to go wrong when Ann Holman visited Burnham Fair in 1855. On the way home she went to a beerhouse in Wooburn, kept at the time by George Waldron. George was married to her niece, and he was also a shoemaker living in Lake End. There was dancing that night at the beerhouse which finished late, 11pm or 2am. Ann stayed there overnight, and according to George she shared a bed with James Wells. Ann denied this, saying that she did not go to bed at all, and both she and George refuted any suggestion of impropriety. It was pointed out that James was aged about 30 at the time, while Ann was in her mid-fifties.

John Holman saw things differently. From that date he had refused to cohabit with his wife and was highly suspicious of Ann. James Wells rented a room from John for a time, and John accused James of making himself at home in the beerhouse and his living quarters, and of being received by Ann when John was not at home. In turn, Ann had discovered letters from another woman to John which she believed showed he was having an affair. Their marriage had broken down.

In February 1860, financial difficulties led John to give up the beerhouse in Lake End. When asked what home he was going to provide for Ann when they left the beerhouse, he said he did not care and she must "shift for herself". John was out when the brewer came to take possession and Ann was ill in bed – she suffered from a diseased leg. Mr Palmer, who owned the building, prevailed on the brewer to allow Ann a few days' grace but then, on 14 February, she was turned out.

Homeless and with her husband absent, Ann was taken in by a neighbour, Elizabeth Wise. Elizabeth was living in Lake End with her elderly father and her four children, and William Wells, James' brother. William was variously described as a lodger or as the householder with Elizabeth his housekeeper. In reality he was Elizabeth's common law husband. Her actual husband had deserted her ten years earlier, and William Wells was the father of her three younger children. William worked as a thatcher, earning on average 4s a day, and indicated that he supported the

household financially. The newspaper reported that he “excited considerable merriment by his drollery” when he gave evidence to the court. Meanwhile, Elizabeth admitted to the court that she had previously been in trouble with the law and spent six months in prison.

Elizabeth explained that she was providing Ann with three meals a day plus beer, port, brandy and as much gin as she could get, as recommended by the doctor. William Wells was seeking over £15 from John to cover the costs of supplying this food and drink to Ann. It was admitted that James Wells was also living in the same house. John was so suspicious about this that he climbed a ladder to look through the window and see if he could find James and his wife together. Elizabeth was however adamant that she slept with Ann and James slept with his brother William.

The judge was unimpressed by John as a witness and ruled that he should pay the amount claimed to William Wells. Ann continued living with Elizabeth Wise for a time, but later Elizabeth and William moved to Clewer where they lived as man and wife with their children. They had perhaps tired of supporting Ann before then, because in the summer of 1861 John Holman was charged with deserting his wife who had then become chargeable to Eton Union. He was ordered to pay 4s a week for her upkeep. In 1871 Ann was living alone in a cottage in Dorney village, still describing herself as a wife. By 1881, as we have seen, she was in the workhouse, and she died there in 1883 and was buried in Dorney.

Despite being parish clerk in Dorney, John Holman had other unpleasant characteristics. In February 1863 he was sentenced to six months hard labour in prison for the indecent assault of two young girls, aged 8 and 11, in Windsor. Sadly, this was not his first offence of this nature; he had committed similar crimes in Eton Wick and elsewhere in Bucks.

Ann’s suspicions about her husband’s other woman seem to have been well founded. By 1861 John was living with Eliza Greenwood, a widow who kept a grocer’s shop in Cippenham. Sometimes he was called her lodger; sometimes she was said to be his servant. John remained there until he died in 1890 and was buried in Burnham. Initially he described himself as married but later as single, which effectively he was. Newspaper reports indicate that Eliza was a feisty character. She owned property in Cippenham, and reports of court cases twice describe her as a voluble old lady. On one occasion the defendant accused her of lying about her surname, saying that it was not Greenwood. Maybe this was an allusion to her relationship with John, but there is uncertainty also about her former husband(s) – she was apparently born Eliza Haines and married a builder called Burton – and the father of her daughter Georgiana born in 1850.

This case shows how ordinary people coped with the breakdown of marriage in the years before divorce became readily available. Some, like John and Elizabeth, were able to find new partners and move forward with their lives. Others like Ann found themselves destitute. Elderly and in poor health, she was unable to support herself and eventually entering the workhouse became the only option.