

Life & Death in Bletsoe 1813 – 1925

Random jottings from a Parish Register & other sources

by Edward Bean Copyright© 2010

Although at first sight appearing to be simply a list of names and dates, the *Bletsoe Burial Register 1813-1925* contains many clues as to how people lived and died in Bletsoe. Occasionally there are notes in the margin giving the deceased's employment or the circumstances of death. Not only is the individual's name given, but also their abode, date of burial, age, and the name and office of the person performing the ceremony. The abode is often just the name of the village or town, but occasionally a more complete street address is given. When we combine this information with that given in the *1851 Census*, then it becomes possible to build a picture of life in Bletsoe in the 19th century.

People and Places

Within the parish of Bletsoe there were four main centres of population: Bletsoe village, Whitwick Green, Bourne End, and North End. There were also minor outposts at Bletsoe Park, more recently known as Park Farm Studios, and Stoke Mill, at that time a detached part of Bletsoe Parish surrounded by Sharnbrook land.

Whitwick Green (mostly flattened during construction of Thurleigh Airfield) was a largish hamlet of eight households according to the 1851 Census. Bourne End seems to have been a similarly sized hamlet of eight households, while North End had seven households. The village of Bletsoe accounted for the larger part of the parish population with 57 households.

Many well known local families seem to have been here for centuries, the same family names recurring in the parish registers decade after decade. Among these, the *Brown, Curtis, Jacquest, Pettit, Risely*, and *White* families seem to be particularly prominent.

When we compare the 1851 census with the 1991 census, Bletsoe in 1851 had fewer households (74 vs. 101), but a much larger population (407 vs. 246). In percentage terms this means that the population has declined by 39% while the number of households has increased by 36%. Average occupancy in 1851 was 5.5, whereas in 1991 it was only 2.4 persons per household.

Occupations and Employment

Occupations are occasionally recorded in the Burial Register and cover a wide social spectrum, including thatcher, labourer, farmer, travelling razor grinder, traveller, sojourner, or army officer.

However, much more can be learned about occupations and employment from census returns. The 1841 census was the first to mention individuals by name; whilst the 1851 Census includes additional details including residence, occupation, age, relationship to head of household, marital status, and place of birth. The census for Bletsoe, as could be expected, shows that employment for men and boys was mainly in agriculture, and for women and girls it was lace making. In fact, lace making employed more people than any other occupation. The tables following this article, derived from the 1851 census, give a detailed breakdown of occupation and employment for the parish.

With 102 agricultural labourers resident in Bletsoe, and only 79 employed here, it would be fair to conclude that a significant number were either employed only on a casual basis or worked in adjacent parishes. Bearing in mind that at that time there was no unemployment benefit or state pension, then many families would have had to rely 'on the parish' during the winter months; consequently some men were 'roundsmen', sent each day by the Parish Overseer around the local farms to seek work, or employed by the Parish on highway maintenance.

The staple income for many families would have come from lacemaking, as reflected by the large number of women listed as lacemakers. They almost certainly sold or bartered their lace to agents who travelled the local villages. These agents also sold the raw materials and equipment, and were often credit agents, pawnbrokers, or 'tick men', who would make small loans or provide goods such as clothing 'on the never never'. Some larger villages had weekly or monthly lace markets where the buyers would set up stalls, and locally this may have been the case at Sharnbrook. Several old established Bedford retailers began as travelling lace agents or 'tick men'.

The fact that the 1851 Census lists 11 children as 'scholars' is notable. Formal schooling only came to the village in the first half of the century. Earlier the Parish Clerk received a small fee to teach village children the rudiments of reading, writing & arithmetic. The 'National School' adjacent to the church opened in 1852. At that time schooling was not free. Children went to school only when their parents could afford the fee, and frequently took it with them at the beginning of each school week. The fee was usually one old penny per week, hence the name 'Penny Schools'. One can only imagine the pride of an illiterate farm labourer when giving his son's or daughter's occupation as 'Scholar' to the Census Enumerator.

Visitors

A significant number of visitors were buried here, presumably because of the difficulty of transporting a corpse any distance, at least until the railway network became established in the second half of the 19th century. There are also a number of vagrants, gypsies, and other travellers buried here, including no less than three

gypsy children who died at different times in Bourne End Lane, and three unknown individuals who drowned at different dates in the river or brook and were buried in unmarked graves.

Workhouse and Asylum

Times could be very hard, the average farm labourers' wage at that time being less than 10 shillings (50p) and a loaf of bread averaging 1s 2d (6p), but when wheat prices were high a loaf could exceptionally cost up to 6s 8d (34p). Inevitably, many of the poor or infirm ended up living "on the Parish" or "in the poorhouse", and could be a considerable financial burden; this was at a time when the Poor Laws required each parish to be responsible for the upkeep of its own poor, infirm, and insane. In 1832 *James Jacquest* lists his profession as 'Keeper of the Poorhouse' in the baptism register. Part of *Bletsoe Poorhouse* - first mentioned in the register in 1828 - is traditionally reputed to have been located in the second-floor rooms of the cottages that now form nos. 13, 15, and 17 *Memorial Lane*. There are apocryphal tales of insane villagers being locked in the attics there, but it is difficult to confirm the location as parish workhouses had been largely dissolved in 1834, some years before the first meaningful census in 1841. According to a church terrier (inventory) of 1822 there were cottages "adjoining the churchyard on the south-west of the yearly value of about 20s., which is at present occupied by old and infirm people, who the churchwardens permit to live rent free". Other paupers were lodged elsewhere at parish expense; the Churchwardens Account Books of the period record regular payments for accommodation of paupers, sometimes with relatives.

By the 1840s the poor of the parish were being sent to *Bedford Union Workhouse*, and similarly, by 1860 the 'insane' were being sent to *Three Counties Asylum, Arlesey*. However, the parish still met the cost through "assessment" and appear to have remained responsible for their burial, the authorities regularly sending remains back to Bletsoe for interment.

The *Bedford Union Workhouse* was built as a result of the 1834 *Poor Law Amendment Act* which was intended to eradicate the scandalous conditions in many parish workhouses. The *Bedford Asylum*, which had stood in Ampthill Road, was replaced by *Three Counties Asylum, Arlesey*, built as a direct result of the 1845 *Lunacy Act* and designed to provide enlightened treatment for the mentally ill and secure accommodation for the criminally insane. Whilst it is now widely recognised that the "lunatic asylums" were sometimes misused by parishes in order to rid themselves of people that were *then* regarded as being 'difficult' or an 'embarrassment' to the parish, such as unmarried mothers or the physically disabled, it is difficult to discover whether this was true in Bletsoe.

Disease

Infectious disease was inevitably the cause of many deaths; this is confirmed by large clusters of burials in certain years and often involving members of the same family, many being children and infants.

There was almost certainly an outbreak of disease in 1829 when ten deaths occurred during August, and again in January, February, and March of 1832 when eleven children died. These could have resulted from scarlet fever, cholera, diphtheria, typhus, smallpox, typhoid or other infectious disease – in fact the register explicitly records an outbreak of cholera in the autumn of 1832 during which nine people died in nineteen days.

This outbreak occurred some 22 years before *John Snow* discovered that the source of cholera was contaminated drinking water. (In making the discovery he coincidentally founded the modern science of epidemiology). It was therefore remarkable that the Bletsoe outbreak was so limited, especially when so many people could have been drinking from the same water source.

Smallpox had been a major killer until the beginning of the nineteenth century when it declined following Edward Jenner's 1796 discovery of vaccination (using Cowpox virus). We know that Bletsoe paupers benefited as there are records of payments to Vaccinators.

The introduction of piped water, better housing, mass immunisation, and antibiotics, have since helped to ensure that many of the infectious diseases that wrought such destruction have now all but disappeared.

Childbirth

Disease was not the only killer. It is clear from the burial register that many women died during childbirth. Their infant children often followed soon after; presumably lacking the valuable antibodies passed on in their mother's milk, or for lack of a wet nurse, or suitable and uncontaminated food.

Many, many infant burials are recorded in the Bletsoe register, some noted as 'unbaptized', and some not given a funeral but instead simply noted as 'buried by the Parish Clerk'.

Crime and Misadventure

Only one death is clearly attributed to criminal activity when, in 1874, *Arthur Woods*, aged 13, was noted as having been "Killed by a Robber". Another Bletsoe resident is recorded in 1820 as having 'died suddenly at the Falcon'; whether it was the beer, the food, or another cause entirely is not known, as the exact cause of death is not given. One suicide is recorded in 1820, with a note stating that 'He hung himself in Mr St Leger's Dog Kennel'

The Parish Clergy

In Georgian and Victorian times, the 'living' enjoyed by a Rector or Vicar could often be very good; sufficient to maintain a large household of paid servants. We know from census data that in 1851 the Rector, his wife, and two daughters, enjoyed the services of four live-in servants, and probably had several other live-out servants to manage the gardens and stables. Incumbents, generally, 'owned' a 'living' for their lifetime and inevitably became infirm with age. Some also held more than one living and could be absent for many months. It was thus common for church services to be administered by a curate, employed at a small salary by the incumbent.

The Bletsoe Burial Register shows that in 1815 *Joseph Niblock* was the curate employed by the Rector, *William Fancourt*, then aged 79. In October 1817 *Thomas Margetts* succeeded *Niblock* as curate, but within five months he found himself officiating at his employer's funeral. He remained in the parish until November 1818, when he became curate at Riseley, and *John Leete* took over as Rector of Bletsoe. In 1832, *Leete* officiated at a funeral on May 1st, but was himself buried on May 31st, aged 56.

Leete was succeeded by *John Tomlinson Day*, notable for his somewhat variable handwriting, the quality of which appears to bear a direct relationship to the social status of the individual being buried - often nothing better than a scrawl for a farm labourer, but almost perfect copperplate for members of the St. John family. Day was also responsible for the construction in 1836 of a major part of what is now the Old Rectory having demolished its thatched predecessor.

Day died in 1881, aged 75, and was succeeded by *Edmund Tudor St John*, who himself died only three years later aged 36 as the result of a cricketing injury, and was in turn succeeded by *J H Bolingbroke*. Being related to the *St. John* family (the patrons of St. Mary, Bletsoe), both *St. John* and *Bolingbroke* fell into the category of being 'second sons of the gentry' and thus almost automatically considered for the position of Rector.

The Parish Clerks

During *Leete*'s time as Rector (1818-1832), *William Falkner* was the Parish Clerk. He (and presumably his predecessors and successors) lived in the 16th century cottage which, until the 1950s, was always known as *The Parish Clerk's Cottage*, and owned by the parish. It stood on the site of what is now 22 & 24 The Avenue. In 1822 Falkner paid a yearly rent of 30 shillings - approximately £300 today.

Parish Clerks were officers of the church and often combined the post with the duties of sexton, scrivener, teacher, timekeeper, and poorhouse overseer. They helped officiate at church services and were entitled to receive a small annual payment from each farm and cottage as well as a small fee for each wedding, christening, and funeral. The scrivener's job was to read and write for those (the

majority) who could not, and hence often took on the role of unofficial lawyer and font of knowledge. The timekeeper's job was to fulfil the Parish's legal duty to maintain a parish timepiece; the main reason why almost every parish church possessed a clock.

Bletsoe's Parish Clerks seem to have been blessed with relatively long life: *William Falkner* was buried on 1st April, 1831, aged 78. *William*'s father, Thomas, had preceded him as Parish Clerk until his death in 1783, aged 63. *William Falkner* was succeeded as Parish Clerk by *Richard Haines*. After 27 years, *Richard Haines* died aged 70, and was in turn succeeded by his son *Frederick Haines*, who in turn died in 1894 aged 72 and was noted in the register as being "*for about 50 yrs Clerk & Sexton, and a Ringer*" There exists a bill of 1835 from Frederick Haines to the Parish for "Scooling and Tolling the Bell.", and there are numerous payments recorded in the Churchwarden's Accounts for "winding of the Churche Clocke".

Conclusion

It is difficult to uncover much historical detail of the everyday lives of local people, particularly those who existed beyond living memory, but it is nonetheless surprising how much can be found in the margins and detail of the Parish Registers. This article is an attempt to pull together some of the more readily available sources, and should really be regarded as work in progress - something that gets added to and refined as more small items of information are collected and connected.

Given the time, it would be possible using the registers and census information to build a fairly complete tree of families that resided in the parish and how they were interrelated, but that is something that will have to wait for a more dedicated and able volunteer!

I can think of no better way of concluding this slightly morbid article than to quote the inscription on the 1812 memorial, unearthed during the recent rebuilding of the churchyard wall, to Nicholas King, a Bletsoe farmer:

*The day is hasting when like me
Thou too shalt die and ashes be
Therefore repent, no time delay
As no one knows their dying day*

Employment of Bletsoe People by Bletsoe Employers, 1851

Derived from 1851 Census data.

This table does not include people resident within but employed outside the parish or live-out servants.

Employers Name	Occupation	Acreage Farmed	Location	Numbers Employed				Totals
				Family	Labourers	Servants	Others	
(numerous)	Self-employed Lacemaker	0	Throughout the parish	106	0	0	0	106
John Thomas	Farmer	900	Bletsoe Cottage & Castle Farm	1	30	1	2	34
Daniel Hipwell	Farmer & Miller	385	Stoke Mill	1	20	1	4	26
Sophia Beall	Farmer	350	Park Farm	1	10	2	4	17
John Gell	Farmer	211	Whitwick Green	1	5	2	2	10
Robert Bennett	Farmer & Publican	150	Falcon Inn	1	7	3	0	11
Hezekiah Spuckley	Farmer	242	Bourne End	1	6	2	0	9
Henry Beauford	Magistrate & Agent	0	Castle	1	0	6	1	8
John T Day	Clergyman	0	Rectory	1	0	4	0	5
William Heritage	Farmer	30	Bourne End	3	0	0	0	3
Daniel Payne	Farmer	80	Whitwick Green	1	1	1	0	3
Levi Savage	Farmer	32	Bourne End	2	0	0	0	2
Catherine Brown	Dressmaker	0	Village	1	0	1	0	2
	TOTALS	2348		121	79	23	13	236

N.B. The total area of Bletsoe in 1991 (which now excludes Stoke Mill) was 2246 acres.

Bletsoe Occupations in 1851

Derived from 1851 Census data.

People	Occupation	Servant employees	Manual employees
106	Lacemaker		
102	Agricultural Labourer		102
21	House Servant	21	
11	Pauper		
11	Scholar		
8	Farmer	12	59
6	Farm Servant	6	
3	Groom	3	
2	Cottager		
2	Governess		
2	Grazier		
2	Labourer		2
3	Roadman		3
2	Washerwoman		
1	Brickmaker		
1	Clergyman	4	
1	Dressmaker	1	
1	Farm Bailiff		
1	Gentleman		
1	Grocer & Carrier		
2	Laundress		
1	Magistrate & Agent	6	
1	Miller / Farmer	1	24
1	Shopkeeper		
293	TOTALS	54	190

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Burials Register of Bletsoe, 1813 - 1925, Bedfordshire County Record Office.
Bedfordshire Parish Registers, Volume XXIV, Bletsoe 1582 - 1812, Bedfordshire County Record Office, 1941.
Bletsoe Graveyard Plan, 1999. Churchwardens of St Mary, Bletsoe (unpublished).
1851 Census for the Parish of Bletsoe, HM Office of Censuses & Surveys
History of Bedfordshire, Joyce Godber, Bedfordshire County Council, 1969.
1991 Census Key Statistics, Bedfordshire County Council, 1993
Vestry Minute Book 1852 to 1952
Bedford Union Return, 1846.