

THE SHIRLEYS OF HEMPTON

Since retirement, having a lifelong interest in local history, I decided to research my mother's family history. (This has now led to an attempt at a county-wide 'Shirley' history to help other 'Shirleys' both here and abroad.) After 12 months of libraries, County records, churches and churchyards (usually rain and windswept with my luck!) fresh traces fade and, for now, the story is complete for my particular branch of the family tree.

It should be remembered that in the 17th and 18th centuries there was no compulsion to record births, deaths or marriages. What details there are appear in parish records of Births, Marriages and Deaths (Burials). Baptism records are not necessarily accurate as in poorer areas the practice seemed to be to have one baptism for a number of children of varying ages in a family. Consequently the baptism date is not always the actual birth date (in the following pages these have been obtained by calculation from later accurate census records which commenced in 1841 at 10-year intervals; however, reference cannot be made to any census after 1881 as by law a 100-year gap must be retained before release to the public.

Information is very vague in the early days and most of the origin details shown are by circumstance of names and dates, together with locations which fit the known facts and relationships. The earliest trace of the Shirley family, from which our line springs, appears to be at Great Barford, the first record at this Church being that of the baptism of Thomas Shirley, son of William and Ann in 1747. This must mean that William was born about 1746 and to put this date into perspective, this is the year of Bonnie Prince Charlie's defeat at Culloden. This same William and Ann had eight children, but the one we are most interested in is Thomas who appears to have moved to Hempton just prior to or at the time of his marriage to Ann French in 1803 at Deddington Church.

Their first child was born in 1803. In 1807 there is a Shirley registered in Parish Records without a Christian name, shown as 'Blank'. There were then further children, among whom were William (b. 1811) and John (b. 1806). In the 'John' line there are two unexpected branches brought about by Shirley daughters marrying into families at Hanwell and Sibford. This was completely unforeseen and it is possible, therefore, that there are still some distant relatives unknown as yet!

A word should now be said regarding the number of untraced females. It was common practice in large families to place girls in domestic service in large cities where they eventually married and settled. This explains why so many of the female side of the family are not traceable after the age of 14-15. This was also the case with boys, particularly when serving apprenticeships which in those days were usually residential with the 'Master'.

This has been an interesting exercise and I have learned much about the living conditions of the age, and feel sure that we have little appreciation of the hardships of that period. A great proportion of infants died before they were two or three, disease was rife, typhus and particularly measles, and starvation was never very far away. In fact there is some evidence to show that the local authorities in Deddington and Hempton organised emigration round about 1830 to North America with sponsorship from local charities in an attempt to alleviate the situation.

The family has always been associated with the land and most of the male members of the family are known as shepherds. The Industrial Revolution

(from about 1785) was to change the way of life for many country families and result in mass emigration of those seeking work in the growing industrial towns. This reached a climax after the end of the First World War in 1918.

To bring the family to life, it is perhaps an idea to look at some comparative dates in history and see the happenings in these people's lifetimes. When Thomas Shirley (b.1776) was a young man he must have heard of the French Revolution which was going on at the time; two years after he married (1803) was the Battle of Trafalgar and the death of Nelson. During his early married life he saw Napoleon's retreat from Moscow and the Battle of Waterloo. Queen Victoria was born in 1819 and Napoleon died in 1821. Shelley, Byron and Beethoven died during his lifetime and slavery was abolished when he was 59.

In John Shirley's lifetime the Crystal Palace Exhibition was held, Prince Albert died and the Crimean War was fought (The Charge of the Light Brigade). He would have heard of the Indian Mutiny, the Black Hole of Calcutta and the American Civil War. In the time of Thomas (grandfather) came the Industrial Revolution, together with the agricultural changes which this brought. With mechanisation of much of the farm work and the consequent drift away from the land to the factories, family life was altered forever.

This period of time, spanning eight reigns, brings to mind the age-old question whether, despite all the hardships and poverty, they were not more content in their tranquil world than we are today with the stresses and strains of a more affluent society.

I would like to record my thanks to the Revd R Hannah, Mrs Heywood of Tomwell where my grandfather was shepherd 100 years ago (who gave me a most important clue), and also to the *Deddington News* editors, Mr and Mrs Stone, for their time and encouragement. To anyone about to attempt a similar project I would give one piece of advice which does not seem to appear in any reference books: ask your older relatives to search their memories first. I missed out on this, possibly because it is so obvious.

Some local names I found to be interrelated are: Ann French, b. 1799; Ann Bartlett, b. 1839; Ann Vincent, b. c1860; Sarah Wilkins, b. c1910; George Calcott, m. 1871; Frank Mewle (Barford), m. 1902; Emily Bliss, b.c1885. It would be interesting to hear if these names stir the memory in the Deddington area today.

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