

WOODBURY LOCAL HISTORY

SOCIETY

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Society projects

Are there any volunteers to take part in various projects, which are being undertaken by a few members of the Society, on aspects of Woodbury's history, and which need more research? Sally Elliot and Sylvia Wickenden are studying fields, trees and hedgerows in an historical context using documents and maps as well as locating some of these areas of historic interest. Several of the strip fields of the old medieval common fields can still be seen in parts of the parish and need to be further investigated. Sally Elliot, Roger Stokes and Nigel Tucker have been interviewing the older members of the parish for their memories of an earlier period. The audio tapes, with a picture of the interviewee on the front, can be borrowed from the oral history section of the Society Archives. If anyone has any candidates for recording and would like to get involved with this work, please contact Roger or Sally. The following are some suggestions for in-depth investigation: sport in the parish; a history of the pubs and beer houses; the military camps on Woodbury Common; a record of all the shops from the earliest to the present day ... If any member is interested or has a topic they wish to study contact Gill or Carol who can show what work has already been done and what maps and records are available in the Archive Room.

St Swithun's and the Reformation

It is hard to imagine how the parishioners of Woodbury must have reacted to the destruction of all that they been taught and believed in since Saxon times when Henry VIII broke with Rome. The vicar of Woodbury, who was chosen from amongst the Priest Vicars of the Cathedral, was obliged to tell his parishioners that they must now adopt a new form of worship and were forbidden to continue in the old way. The churchwardens' accounts do not indicate how the parishioners felt about the changes, but they did record some of the results. When Edward came to the throne his commissioners travelled around the country ordering the churches to relinquish their jewels

and vestments. In 1546 the accounts for Woodbury recorded that the churchwardens were obliged to take the church jewels to Exeter to be weighed. Three years later they record that the altars were taken down and a man was paid to carry away the resulting rubble. In 1550 the churchwardens again went to Exeter to produce an inventory of the church goods for the Commissioners and the following year these goods were handed over 'for the King's use'. The full list of vestments etc. is recorded in the accounts. In 1553, on the death of Edward, Mary was proclaimed Queen, and once more Catholicism returned to the country. The churchwardens' accounts show that the bells were rung again when she was proclaimed, and gradually the parish began to restore its church. The rood cross with Mary and John, as well as the altars, were 'dressed', and a mason was paid for making St Margaret's altar. St Margaret was the patron saint of childbirth, so that women who were accustomed to putting themselves under her protection must have been most confused at the 'comings and goings' of her altar. Having just got accustomed to their restored rituals of worship and belief, Queen Mary died, and with her any hope of retaining the old ways. In 1558 the parishioners were once more obliged to take down the images, which according to the accounts were buried. Three men were paid to pull down the two altars again and carry away the stones, as well as taking down the holy water stone. In 1562 the parish was obliged to pay for another new book called 'The Book of Prayer'.

We are fortunate that in this period of extraordinary change, the seemingly trivial accounts of a parish can give some idea of the confusion there must have been in the minds of the ordinary men and women in parishes, all over the country, at the enormous and bewildering changes effecting their little communities.

Victorian Tragedy in Woodbury

In the 1830s members of a large wealthy family from Barbados settled in Bristol, except for the youngest son who moved to Exeter. In 1837 Samuel Thomas married an illiterate girl from Pinhoe, and in 1839 moved to Woodbury with their two children and rented the house now known as Thornleigh. In 1848 he bought the beautiful house known as Izel Cottage, opposite the Village Green, and farmed a few acres of land in Cottles Lane. Here he and his wife and two sons and five daughters lived quite happily. When he died his son John Branford Thomas bought the family house at auction and moved in with his young Woodbury wife (a marriage of necessity) and four small children, his older brother Samuel (who was in partnership with him as a small farmer) also lived with them. The 1891 census shows John and his wife living at Izel with their ten children, and his older unmarried siblings, Samuel and Margaretta. Louisa, John's wife, died in 1892 and by this time it was apparent that something was going wrong. The family finances were in difficulty and the children were being moved from private schools into the village school in Woodbury, and as soon as they were eighteen they were fleeing the nest. One girl married Samuel Miller, who was a licensed hawker living at Well Park House, two went to Woolwich where they lived with Samuel Miller's brother and wife before getting married; his son, John Carter Thomas, married a Woodbury girl in Yorkshire. In 1901 there were three children still living at home, Ethel Grace aged 19 and a boy of 11 and girl of 12, together with the unmarried uncle and aunt. By December Ethel Grace finding herself pregnant married in the Registry Office in Exeter an apprentice butcher of Woodbury called Charles Channon, who was a year younger than her. The baby was born a month or so after the marriage and died within a few days. Obviously something had happened to break up the family in such a dramatic way, apart from the death of the mother. The tragedy that was emerging appeared in the local newspapers of 1901. In June of that year Samuel Thomas unsuccessfully attempted to commit suicide by cutting his throat at Izel Cottage. After a period in hospital he was charged with attempted self-murder before the magistrates and ordered to appear at the next Quarter Sessions. He moved to Exmouth with his sister Margaretta, into whose care he was given. Within a few days, in a state of great depression, he went out one night and hanged himself at Stagbury Hill near Littleham. Shocking though this was, there was worse to come at the coroner's inquest. Amongst the witnesses was Samuel's niece, Ethel Grace, who

said that she had left her father because he was 'so disagreeable' and moved in with her married sister at Well Park House. She stated that her Uncle Samuel had brought up his brother's children, feeding and clothing them out of his own money. 'Father', she stated, 'had been a drunkard all his life'. Evidently Samuel's deep depression was brought on by worrying about the habits of his brother. By the time Margaretta and Samuel had moved to Exmouth Ethel Grace and her brother and sister had all moved away from their father. Is Ethel's description of her father being 'disagreeable' more than just drunkenness — and would this account for the girls fleeing the nest and possibly Ethel's pregnancy? No more is known about John Brandford Thomas until his death in 1907 in the Poor House in Honiton. He had written his will whilst living at the Black Lion Inn in Honiton and then rented a small cottage at Offwell. Ethel Grace left her young butcher husband and took a boat to Australia in about 1911 to join an aunt, eventually moving to New Zealand. There are two further sad items. Izel Cottage was pulled down in the early 1900s and two red brick semi-detached houses were built in its place in 1913; and Margaretta died and was buried at Exminster Lunatic Asylum. Ethel Grace's granddaughter in New Zealand contacted me a year ago to say that she understood that her great-grandfather had been born in Woodbury and did I know anything about his history. At that time I did not, but after much digging the above is the story that emerged. My correspondent knew nothing of her Barbadian background but has since discovered that the Thomas family in the West Indies were wealthy plantation owners. A strange coincidence emerged, whilst I was researching this history, when the new owner of Well Park House told me that an old bible went with the house. On enquiring if she knew to whom it belonged she gave it to me to look at. To my amazement it was the family bible of the Thomas family dating from 1770 which recorded the dates and times of the births of the family in Barbados, including the Samuel who came to Woodbury in 1839, and from whom my contact in New Zealand is a directly descended. The bible must have been rescued by Ethel's sister, who married Samuel Miller and lived at Well Park, and for some reason it was left behind in the house more than fifty years ago.

Programme for 2007

- 1 Feb AGM and party
- 1 Mar 'Woodbury and the plantations in Demarara in the 19th century'
- 3 May Members' histories of their houses
- 6 Sep 'Vanishing Street Furniture.'