

Village Echoes

Many interesting reports concerning parishioners of days gone by are often tucked away in the local press under the reports of criminal cases and inquests heard at Cranbrook Petty Sessions and the West Kent Quarter Sessions.

For instance, in 1852 Joseph Reed and William Golding appeared before Cranbrook Bench accused of housebreaking and stealing £5 10s 6d, five pairs of boots, a bag and other articles belonging to Thomas Stiles. Details of the trial weren't reported, only the sentence – 12 months' hard labour for Reed and 10 years' transportation for Golding. The same day, a Mary Stiles was found guilty of stealing an apron from Martha Blunt and was given 6 months' hard labour.

In August of the same year, labourer Joseph Watchhouse was sentenced to three months for stealing two gallons of potatoes and one gallon of onions from the garden of Goudhurst's Vicar, the Reverend George Irving. The vegetables were valued at £2 1s 9d and although Watchhouse denied the theft, he was convicted because the potatoes grown by the Vicar were described as a "peculiar sort" and thus easily identified.

In July 1870 members of the Philips family were before the Bench. Jane Philips, along with Martha Maitland, pleaded guilty to stealing three faggots (of wood) from Jane Hayward. Since Maitland had previously been of good character her sentence was very lenient – one day – whereas Jane Philips, whose character was deemed otherwise, was sentenced to 14 days' hard labour. Meanwhile, Stephen Philips, the husband of Jane, was charged with stealing a glass bottle of "cyder-wine" from John Blinkhorn of Horsmonden. Philips, who had been thatching Blinkhorn's roof, had taken the opportunity when left alone in the house to steal the bottle. Worse still, he had then given it to his ten year old son to hide under his smock. For his sins Philips received a severe reprimand and was sentenced to 2 months' hard labour. Nothing was said about his son. It then transpired that in February of the same year, the Philips' daughter (name not given) had also received 2 months' hard labour for stealing flour and butter.

Not every appearance before the magistrate involved theft – the evil influence of alcohol underlay a variety of cases. In July 1855 a labourer named Waghorn was fined £100 (a huge amount in those days) for illegally distilling 18 quarts of illicit spirits; his case was not helped by the fact that he and his daughter were also accused of assaulting the constable investigating the allegation. In 1834, a wagoner, Edward Blackman, paid the ultimate price for being drunk in charge of a wagon when he fell off and it ran over him. He died several days later, leaving a wife and six children and a verdict of accidental death.

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