

Village Echoes

The parish registers of St Mary's Church date from November 1558 and were transcribed by the former "Goudhurst Village History Society" in the 1930s. A few years ago, members of the current Local History Society helped to computerise these transcripts and, where possible, the transcripts were checked against the originals which enabled additional information to be included. The extra information is usually in the form of a comment by the vicar or curate relating to the individual concerned and, although useful to family historians, is not particularly interesting on its own. However, just occasionally, the registers do include something of wider interest.

In June 1690 a note appended to the baptism of a 15-year-old boy by the name of William James commented that he was a West Indian and servant to Sir James Hayes. Hayes, a barrister and MP, was one of the key organisers in the formation of the Hudson Bay Company in 1670 and came to Goudhurst in 1682 when he purchased the Bedgebury estate from the Culpeper family. He demolished the old house and built a new one in a better location within the estate. (Since then the house has been considerably altered and would not be recognised by its 17th century owner). Similarly in March 1766 "Thomas", with no surname or age noted, was baptised — he was a "negro servant" to Charles Bathurst, owner of Finchcocks. It was quite common for landowners in England to have black servants at this period.

Nothing more is recorded in the parish registers about these two men, although a William James, who could possibly be the servant from Bedgebury, was buried in March 1693, but with no age or comment to enable a positive identification. A little more, however, is known about Thomas. Charles Bathurst, who owned property, including slaves, in Jamaica, died in 1767 and in his will he specifically stated that he "*forever set free my Negro man named Tom, now living with me, from all bondage, servitude and slavery whatsoever*". The only other similar example specifically recorded in the registers was in September 1819, when Joseph and Margaret Antonis from Yeovil, Somerset had their son Christian baptised at St Mary's. The register simply noted that the father was "a poor black". Goudhurst history is silent on the subsequent fate of this couple and of William, Thomas and Christian.

The burial registers also occasionally provide snippets of unusual information. On 23rd August 1676, Edward Thurman, vicar of Goudhurst since 1661, was buried in the chancel. His successor, James Fen, was likewise buried in the chancel on 10th June 1709. This is not unusual — burial in the chancel was a sign of status and piety, and there have been several other burials, not all of vicars, there over the years. However, the entries for Thurman and Fen are of interest in specifying nocturnal burials: Thurman was buried at "9 of the clock in the night" and Fen at "7 of ye clock in ye evening". Until the 17th century, funerals of the well-off were elaborate affairs as, in London especially, they followed rules and procedures laid down by the College of Arms. Later, however, in an attempt to by-pass such elaborate ritual and to cut costs, people began to arrange for funerals to take place at night, which also gave the family more control over the ceremony. Eventually, of course, the practice filtered down to those of a lower social class, although we can only speculate if this was the reason in the case of these two vicars of Goudhurst.

Local History Society
Email: info@goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org
Website: www.goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org