

VILLAGE ECHOES

NEW YEAR CHANGES

It is said that January when Christmas is over, is the most popular time to think about divorce. On January 10th 1815 an article appeared in The Maidstone Journal. It began - A truly disgraceful scene occurred in Maidstone on Tuesday last. A man came from Goudhurst for the express purpose of selling his wife, supposing that the cattle market was held on that day.

But finding his mistake and being determined to get rid of his 'rib', he adjourned with her to the Coal Barge, a public house, where after many biddings and high commendations of the charms and virtues she possessed, was sold for the sum of one guinea and a pint of Gin to a poultryman, who came from Goudhurst for the purpose of buying her.

We hear she has five children, one of whom she had in her arms when sold. The scene sounds like an elaborate joke. In reality, it was a carefully choreographed action where the 'purchaser' had already been arranged. As the poultryman was also from Goudhurst it was probably a totally amicable arrangement.



Between the 17th and 19th centuries, divorce was prohibitively expensive and so some lower-class British people couldn't get them—they sold their wives instead. If your marriage broke up in the 1750s, you had to obtain a private Act of Parliament to formally divorce. The custom seems outlandish today, but it could be found in public places like markets, taverns and fairs. Historians disagree on when or how the custom started and how widespread it was, but it seems to have been an accepted alternative divorce among lower-class Britons. It wasn't technically legal, but the way it unfolded in public made it valid in the eyes of many.