

The sad tale of Taffy the Thief

Steeple Aston Village Archive recently found this poem pinned inside the Minute Book of Steeple Aston Vestry - the Victorian version of the Parish Council. It's based on a politically-incorrect old jingle "Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief". But who wrote it, and who was it aimed at?

The first question was fairly easy to answer: A.L.A. = *ala*, Latin for Wing, and the Vestry leader at the time was village historian William Wing. SAVA knows of at least one other sample of his verse, a mock-heroic account of a footpath dispute. David W----- it turned out, was David Woodford: the Vestry Book confirmed that he had served his turn as Overseer of the Poor between 1865 and 1867 alongside the village butcher William Wall - "a man who deals in beef" as the poem puts it.

A DELECTABLE BALLAD

Settinge forthe how David W ——— late Overseer of Steeple Aston outwitted his partner in office ye Deputie Treasurer of his Union ye Inspector of Police aud eke ye District Auditors of publike accompts.

Taffy was an Aston man, Taffy is a thief,
Taffy wronged his partner a man who deals in beef,
Taffy said his shop was robbed which no one can believe,
While Taffy at policeman was laughing in his sleeve.
Taffy went to Wing's house and drew a thumping loan ;
Taffy from his creditors away has safely flown ;
Taffy burnt the parish books and all therein set down
Disclosing how for three whole years he cheated all the town.
Taffy circumvented the cautious Mister Knott
Who took his case a day too soon not thinking of a plot.
Taffy to the Yankee laud 'tis said has crossed the seas.
I hope he felt a qualm or two amid old Ocean's breeze.
Taffy ne'er will come again to see his fatherland,
But end his days, outcast, despised, upon a foreign strand.
So Treasurers and Auditors ne'er trust an Overseer,
For if you do, like Wing and Knott
You'll come to grief I fear.

A. L. A.

Jan. 18, 1869.

The two Overseers were responsible for collecting local rates and distributing the proceeds to the poor and needy. If Wing's verse is to be believed, Woodford had pocketed some of this money and then tried to cover his tracks by burning his account book and telling police his shop had been robbed. He had also "circumvented the cautious Mr Knott" (presumably the district auditor), and had approached Wing himself for a "thumping loan". The Minutes themselves make no mention of the scandal, so Wing and his colleagues had probably made up the shortfall themselves. By the time Wing had his poem printed in 1869, Woodford had fled to America.

Shopkeeping

David Woodford, born in 1815, was the youngest in a large family of stonemasons and shopkeepers. His father, John Woodford, seems to have prospered as a stonemason - he built Chancel Cottage in Fir Lane on land he had leased from the Church in 1809 "for building purposes". John's wife Rebecca also played her part - the 1811 Census noted that "his wife keeps a shop". David's eldest brother, William, ran a butcher's shop at the southern end of Paines Hill. Now a private house, it still bears his initials WW in brickwork on the front. Another of David's brothers, John, worked as a mason from premises in Southside. After he died in 1853, his wife Johanna opened a grocer's shop just below Paynes Hill House (at Hill House - previously Fairview?). David himself appeared to start well, leasing Old Tom's on Northside, and operating a bakery there with his wife, another Rebecca. When the property came up for sale in 1844, David bought it, but struggled to meet his mortgage repayments and went bankrupt in 1854. The couple moved to Cow Lane and opened a shop there in a modest cottage belonging to yet another Woodford brother, George, a butcher and farmer in Kidlington.

Emigration

Rate Books show David and Rebecca abandoned the cottage between April and October 1868. It's not clear what happened to Rebecca, but the US Census for 1880 shows a "labourer" answering David's description lodging with an Irish woman in south Boston, Massachusetts. He might have been tempted to emigrate even without the trouble over the rate money. His widowed sister-in-law Johanna and nephew William had only recently left Steeple Aston and ended up farming in Ohio. It's not clear if David made any attempt to join them. William married over there and produced many descendants. Even earlier, David's niece Eleanor (John and Johanna's daughter b1831) had struck out in another direction - having married a local man, John Durran, in 1852 she sailed with him in 1854 to Geelong, Australia, where they too founded a large family. By 1871 there was no-one called Woodford left in Steeple Aston.