

Ghosts of Tring and Berkhamsted

Following threads of family history among the gravestones, wouldn't it be thrilling to find Ghosts? Yet not a single grave can be found with that name inscribed, not even for the local gravedigger. Ghosts of the past reveal themselves in other ways, whilst highlighting the state of local prison facilities, the justice system and the benevolence of the gentry.

The name Ghost was first used to describe a newcomer to the community, or guest, derived from the pre-seventh century Old Norse word "gestr" meaning a visitor or stranger.⁷⁸

One guest of the parish in 1787 was John Ghost who was sent to the bridewell at Berkhamsted St Peter and publicly whipped for leaving his family chargeable to the parish of Tring, this being his second offence.⁷⁹ In the same year, he broke out of the bridewell and was committed to gaol for 6 months and once again was to be publicly whipped.⁸⁰ Two years later, a report on the state of the bridewell revealed how insecure it was as a gaol, recommending a thorough repair "One side of this prison is against a Cooper's Shop and that Partition is a Mudd Wall, raddeled, and the Inside of the Prison lined with an inch board"; strict orders were given that "no prisoner should be put in this place".⁸¹

Newspaper reports do not always include birth dates which would help to confirm family links, but John was likely the father of William Ghost, who appeared in police records regularly. He sometimes operated with a partner in crime, James Brace, who also lived in Bull's Row, Frogmore Street, Tring. In 1842 both were charged with being in pursuit of game one night in Aston Clinton; the case was dismissed as the witness was unable to prove seeing them in the act of taking game.⁸²

⁷⁸ *Surname database* <http://www.surnamedb.com>

⁷⁹ HALS, *Hertford County Records Session Books 1752-1799* (16 & 23 Apr 1787), p.200

⁸⁰ HALS, *Presentment Book*, Volume 1 (1787)

⁸¹ HALS, *County Records* (Jul-Aug 1789), pp.356-362

⁸² *Bucks Herald* (29 Jan 1842)

In 1854 William Ghost was charged with assaulting police constable Thos. Bygrave. Ghost did not appear, but “his better-half did for him”. P.C. Bygrave had been on the trail of some missing mutton in Ghost’s house and found a pot with some broth in it. Ghost took exception to the implied accusation and “put his fist in the constable’s face” and “hit him over the nose”. He feared he would be sent back to prison as he had been two years previously for assaulting Bygrave. Rather unwisely then, he began to strip for a fight, demanding a warrant, which was then produced. He was fined £2 and £1 1s 6d expenses. The bench gave some sage advice, that constables should show their warrant first.⁸³

William Ghost’s previous offence in 1853 was the result of Bygrave attempting to turn Ghost out of a beer-shop having spent his pension “rather freely on some drink”. On that occasion Ghost had the help of another pensioner and a near-blind pal encouraged them to kick the constable; all three were taken to “the cage”.⁸⁴ William had earned his Chelsea pension from his service in the 7th Regiment of the Kent Fusiliers in 1824-1826. He was discharged from the army with a rupture caused by raising weights at the public works in Corfu.

With James Brace and three others in 1857, William was charged with being concerned with stealing 86 fleeces of wool. Mr Crouch of Misswell near Tring had sheared 396 teggs and had stored the wool in an upstairs room in a cottage adjoining where the shepherd slept. He missed the fleeces when he was weighing them for sale. Brace had caused suspicion with a potential buyer when he lied about his name and offered the wool at an unrealistically low price. All the prisoners were remanded.⁸⁵

We catch up with William once again in 1865, when he was charged with swearing and making a great noise, generally being drunk and riotous in the High Street of Tring – he had been to Wigginton feast and was determined to let everybody know it. “The calling of the defendant

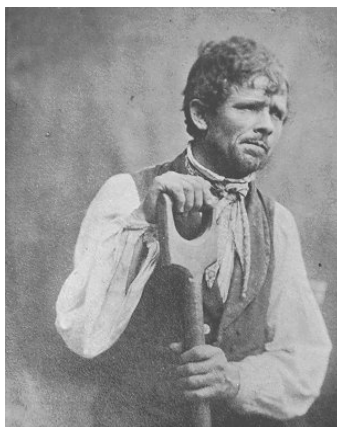
⁸³ *Herts Guardian, Agricultural Journal, and General Advertiser* (10 Jun 1854)

⁸⁴ *Herts Guardian* (15 Jan 1853)

⁸⁵ *Hertford Mercury & Reformer & Bucks Herald* (3 Oct 1857)

was like calling spirits from the vasty deep - the Ghost would not come at the call".⁸⁶

Pity poor Maria Ghost, long-suffering "better-half" of William. In 1846, her son John Ghost, then aged seventeen "a decent looking country lad", was charged with having feloniously stolen a copper boiler, worth five shillings, the property of canvass weaver Thomas Olney. He was acquitted as Olney could not prove that pieces of copper sold by Ghost to marine stores dealer Cyrus Timms belonged to him.⁸⁷ In 1859, another of Maria's sons Jesse Ghost was charged with trespassing in search of game on land in the occupation of Rev. James Williams. Ghost did not appear and was fined 17s. 6d. and in default committed for 14 days.⁸⁸



Richard Ghost, gravedigger (1819-1887)
Source: BLH&MS (DACHT: BK2706)

The "Great Berkhamstead and Northchurch Cottage Garden Society" in 1852 was presided over by Thomas Plumer Halsey MP. The show and competition "excited great interest among the gentry and inhabitants of both parishes, who were present in great force". Following judging and

⁸⁶ *County Chronicle, Surrey Herald & Weekly Advertiser for Kent* (23 Sep 1865)

⁸⁷ *Bucks Gazette* (30 May 1846)

⁸⁸ *Herts Guardian* (12 Apr 1859)

Miss Page's excellent collation for 40 in the assembly room of the King's Arms Inn, "on the cloth being removed, the labourers and cottagers were called in".⁸⁹ Imagine that line of sons of the earth, cap in hand, in awe of their lords and masters. Richard Ghost received the second prize of 3s.6d. in the savoy class. Preparing the ground for cabbages would have been easy for this aptly-named gravedigger.

At Easter Vestry meetings in 1876 and 1883, Richard Ghost, along with a few others who were deemed worthy via the votes of ratepayers, was presented with cash gifts of 30 shillings (worth approximately £100 now).⁹⁰



H & J Matthews Ltd, Castle Street
Source: BLH&MS (DACHT: BK11887)

Richard's aunt Phoebe Ghost married John Mitchell. In 1861, he and three brothers Thomas, William and James lived next door to each other in Castle Street. By 1886, James' sons Henry and James were running H & J Matthews Ltd., Building Contractors, Decorators & Undertakers.⁹¹ Perhaps John's nephew Henry was instrumental in finding employment for Phoebe's nephew Richard; with the face of a man who has dug a lot of graves, he was a Ghost in the graveyard.

Linda Rollitt

⁸⁹ *Hertford Mercury and Reformer* (Oct 1852)

⁹⁰ *Bucks Herald* (Apr 1876) and *Bucks Herald* (Mar 1883)

⁹¹ *Kelly's Directory for Hertfordshire* (1886)