

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

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The Story of Widow Mowl: Parish politics in 18th century rural England

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Reprinted from: *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 1 Spring 2001

I came upon this story whilst researching the cost of Poor Law Relief in the Hundred of Thriplow, South Cambridgeshire in the second half of the 18th century. The overseers' accounts for the parish of Thriplow covered a bare thirty years, 1760–1790, but were extremely detailed and it was mainly these accounts backed up by the parish registers, settlement certificates and removal orders that provided the stark details of the story of Elizabeth Moule or Mowl (the spellings were interchangeable).

For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with the structure of parochial government, I will give an outline of how the poor were cared for before the introduction of the New Poor Law in 1832. From the time of Elizabeth I until 1832 each parish was responsible for caring for the poor and unemployed within its own boundaries. Two officers called Overseers of the Poor were elected each year and it was their responsibility to work out how much they would need and to divide that amount among the taxpayers of the village. Although there was no income tax until 1799, people paid several taxes and some of them were quite high. There was land tax, Church tax, as well as the poor tax. Most of these taxes were based on property and varied with the amount of property owned. In 1776 the poor rate for Thriplow was one shilling in the £. The amount raised that year was £113.1s.2d and the amount spent was £112 10s 4d, a nice bit of book-keeping.

At the back of the overseer's book was this remark: '30th August 1775, William Pomfrett of Waldon agrees to keep his daughter the Widow Moule for half a guinea per quarter of the year and to have five shillings till next Michaels and then to have half a guinea a quarter'. This intrigued me and I started to investigate as to why Thriplow was paying for a lady to live in Saffron Walden.

Elizabeth Pomfrett was born in Saffron Walden in 1742. On the 2 May 1774 she married John Mowl, a higler of Thriplow in Thriplow Church. A higler sells goods from a horse and cart, unlike the pedler who goes on foot. Elizabeth was 32; I don't know how old John was. Thirty-two was quite old to get married, but in the eighteenth century the working classes married much later than they did in Victorian times, often in their late twenties. Apprentices were not allowed to marry until they had finished their apprenticeships, usually a period of seven years. Both girls in service and servants in husbandry, as farm hands were called, lived in their employer's home, where a strict eye was kept on them and their morals. Even when they were free to marry it took them a long time to save enough money before they could marry and set up a home of their own.

John and Elizabeth set up home in Thriplow but, only nine months after they were married, John died. Elizabeth returned to her father in Saffron Walden, but within a week the overseers of Saffron Walden had brought her before the magistrates to be examined as to her financial circumstances. They already had 70 pensioners on their books, so I expect they were reluctant to add another and thereby increase the burden on the taxpayers of the town. They may also have been worried lest Elizabeth was pregnant, for then they would be responsible for the upkeep of the child also, as children born within a parish were the responsibility of that parish.

Perhaps at this stage I should explain that the law only allowed overseers to help those who had been born within their parish, or who were married to those born within the parish, or to those who had been employed within the parish for one year. The Quarter Sessions of the period are full of the wrangles between parishes as to who should bear the brunt of keeping paupers.

The first thing that happened was that on 24 February 1775 the overseers and churchwardens of Saffron Walden 'did complain to' two JPs (William Flower and Thomas Browne) who made out a removal order requiring the Saffron Walden overseers to remove 'Elizabeth Moule widow, who hath lately intruded into your said Parish, there to inhabit as a Parishioner contrary to the laws relating to the Settlement of the Poor, and is likely to become chargeable if not timely prevented'. They charged the overseers to 'remove and convey' Elizabeth to the parish of Thriplow. The next day, 25 February 1775 the JPs examined Elizabeth who made a signed statement declaring that she was legally married to John Moule on 2 May 1774 in the parish church at Thriplow and that they had lived there until her husband's death on 'Monday last'. So less than a week after her husband had died, Elizabeth was sent back to Thriplow. One of the Thriplow Overseers, probably Mary Tinworth who being a widow herself may have felt some sympathy for her, bought her some beer at Widow

Brands (the Green Man public house) when she arrived, for the overseers entry for that date reads: 'paid at Widow Brands for beer on Widow Moules account when she was brought from Walden 1s.10d'.

On March 3 a settlement certificate agreeing that Elizabeth Moul was the 'widow and relict of John Moul' and therefore legally settled in Thriplow, was signed by two churchwardens, Bennet Cranwell and George Colman, (who, despite being a moderately wealthy farmer, could only make his 'mark') and two overseers, Mary Tinworth and William Faircloth.

Their signatures were witnessed by John Godfrey and William Triplow. The following day this document was countersigned by Hale Wortham Senior and Junior, two of his Majesty's Justices of the Peace. They also wrote that William Triplow 'did under oath did see the Churchwardens and Overseers sign and set their seals to the document'. All this probably took place in the Green Man public house as the overseers' account once again records 'Paid for Beare at Brands on Wid Mouls account 3 shillings'. Three shillings was a lot of money, the equivalent of three days wages for a labourer. It is interesting to note that Hale Wortham was Lord of the Manor of Bacon's in Thriplow and that Widow Brand, proprietor of the Green Man pub, was one of his tenants.

But Widow Moule did not stay in Thriplow, for the next day, 5 March, the Overseers' account lists 'for carrying her part of the way to Walding - 2 shillings'. There was then a gap of five months until August 30 when the note referred to at the beginning was written in the back of the overseers' account book: 'William Pumphries of Waldon Agrees to keep his Daughter the Widow Moule for half a guine per Quarter of the year and to have five shillings till next Michaels [*Michaelmass*] and then to have half a guine a quarter'; and the entry within the account states '30th August 1775 paid Wid Moules till St Michaels 5s'.

The rate books for Saffron Walden for 1757 show William Pumfrett living in 'part of a cottage' in Castle Street. He shared with Robert Barrett, who kept a 'shop and cottage' owned by Widow Norris. William probably had either the upstairs or the back of the house. As it is the first house on the list we can presume that it was the house on the corner of Castle Street and Bridge End which is still a shop and house. William died in 1787 and the next rate book for 1790 shows someone else living in the house.

The money was duly paid for the next eleven years until Easter Monday 1786 when it suddenly stopped - why? Had she died? No, the burial register records her burial at Thriplow in 1815 at the age of 74, so why had the money stopped? I thought I would go to Saffron Walden and look at their registers to see what I could find, and here the story takes an interesting twist.

On three dates in July 1785 (Elizabeth would now be 43) the banns of marriage were read for Elizabeth Moule and William Lagden., although the space on the banns certificate for the date of marriage is not filled in. If they were married and moved away it would explain why Elisabeth's pension was stopped, as she was now married to an inhabitant of Saffron Walden and no longer the responsibility of the parish of Thriplow. If she did not marry William Lagden then she would still be Widow Moule when she was buried at the age of 75 (the dates fit) in Thriplow, or maybe there was another Widow Moule the same age. We shall probably never know.

This story reveals several aspects of parish politics of the late 18th century. By paying for Elizabeth to stay with her father, the overseers of Thriplow were saving their taxpayers money for, had she stayed in Thriplow, they would have paid for her rent, her fuel, clothes, food, and nursing should she need it. This would have come to much more than the two guineas a year they were paying her. The story also reveals the unreliability of parish registers: there are still Moules living in Thriplow, yet between 1670 and 1815 there are only five Moules in the registers.

People in the past had the same problems and emotions that we have; the excitement of local history is finding the human face behind the often bare facts and bald statements written in the official documents. What this story does tell us is that people don't change, only the technology for dealing with them changes.

NOTES

Wittering, S., *Parochial variation in poor relief expenditure in Thriplow Hundred (Cambridgeshire) c. 1770–1815* (M.St. thesis unpub. University of Cambridge, 1999).
Cambridgeshire Record Office P156/12/1-2 & CRO P 156/12/2.
Saffron Walden Town Archives.