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Notes and news

BLHA Autumn Event: Visit to Luton Hoo Walled Garden. A visit has been arranged for members on Saturday, 24 September at 2 pm, to include a talk, tour and tea at £5 per person, meet at the garden. Applications to Mike Turner, 117 High St, Clophill, Beds, MK45 4BJ, cheques payable to Bedfordshire Local History Association. Places are limited so please book early.

Heritage Open Days. The next Open Days will take place from 8–11 September 2011. The late registration deadline is 1 August. Contact: English Heritage, Heritage Open Days, 14–16 Cowcross Street, London EC1M 6DG. Tel: 0844 335 1884; Fax: 020 7539 7901; e-mail hods@english-heritage.org.uk

Hillfort Walk. For those who missed this last year, the RSPB are reprising it on 4 September, again with Dr David McCormish bringing the hillfort and the people who lived here 2,500 years ago to life. £4 per person (parking: additional £4 per car for non-RSPB members). Bookings: Tel 01767 680541

Support and leadership for the UK's archive sector. Culture Minister Ed Vaizey has announced that this will transfer to The National Archives from April 2012 following the closure of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA).

A volcano in Iceland?

A *Timewatch* programme on television a few years ago suggested that the deaths of four members of a family, all dying within a few months of one another in 1783–84 and interred in the Dell/Fisher/Brooks family vault at Maulden, were possibly related to the eruption of the Laki volcano in Iceland, which began on 8 June 1783.

The four individuals in the Maulden vault are:

James Hesse, who died on 15 August 1783, aged 33;

James Hesse's father-in-law, Jeffrey Fisher, who died on 21 August 1783, aged 60;

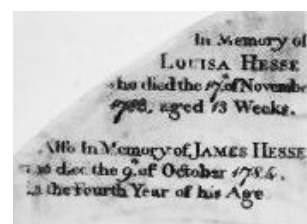
James Hesse's infant children:

Louisa Hesse, who died on 17 November 1783, aged 13 weeks; and

James Hesse (junior), who died 9 October 1784, aged 3.

The inscriptions in the vault, one below the other, add to the feeling that the deaths were related.

We have little evidence as to the causes of these deaths. James Hesse the elder 'died after a few days illness of a violent Fever'.



Photos courtesy of Ann Collett-White

Jeffrey Fisher in 1778:

'had a Stroke of the Palsey . . . & lost at first entirely the use of one side, he got better & lived . . . some [five] years after' (BLARS LL12/26).

His Will signed on 6 May 1782 did not (as was often the custom) allude to any bodily infirmity (TNA PROB11/1109).

The Hesse account books for 1783 and 1784 (BLARS LL17/276 – nothing unfortunately for 1782 or any earlier year) contain numerous entries from at least 15 August 1783 for doctors and apothecaries. From August 1783 to January 1786, the children's mother Ann spent the considerable sum of almost £150 on medicines and medical care. The only clue as to the nature of these illnesses is a reference in March 1784 and again later in 1784 to 6 shillings' worth of tincture of bark – presumably Jesuits' or Peruvian Bark (Quinine) used for malaria and other fevers.

The Hesses lived partly at Flitwick Manor and partly in Brompton, London. We have no means of

knowing how much time they spent at each location. Jeffrey Fisher was living at Ampthill at the time of his death. So, none of the people in the vault lived within the Parish of Maulden, though they were for some of the time only a mile or two from it.

An analysis of mortality records in Bedfordshire parishes about this time shows two summer (August to October) high mortality peaks – in 1781 and 1783. Of 28 Bedfordshire parishes analysed, the higher peak is in 1783 for 16, but for a significant number (9), deaths in 1781 are higher than in 1783. (In the remaining three parishes there is very little difference between the two peaks.) Ampthill, Flitwick and Maulden all lie within the 1783 group. The 1781 parishes with higher than normal mortality include many in north Bedfordshire, but also Woburn, Clophill and Campton. A straight geographical explanation for the differences seems impossible. Both years had very hot summers, so heat-related causes of deaths are likely.

Ann Hesse was born in 1757 and died in 1834 aged about 77. She had two other children by James Hesse both of whom survived into adult life and married, and Ann herself remarried in 1789 to have a further three children of whom only one survived to adult life. The full list of her children is as follows:

Ann Hesse, baptised Flitwick, 6 February 1780, died 1849;

James Hesse (junior), baptised Flitwick, 11 February 1781, died 9 October 1784 aged 3;

Martha Hesse, baptised Flitwick, 10 March 1782, alive, I think, in 1831;

Louisa Hesse, baptised Flitwick, 14 September 1783, died 17 November 1783, aged 13 weeks.

In 1789 Ann married George Brooks and by her second marriage had:

Francis Brooks, born 17 May 1790, died 16 March 1791, aged 10 months;

George Brooks, born 10 January 1792, died 30 April 1793, aged 15 months,

John Thomas Brooks, born 16 December 1794, died 22 December 1858, aged 64.

Her record of infant mortality – four children lost out of seven – is probably no worse than most of her gentry contemporaries.

Since the *Timewatch* programme, further work has been done (see Further reading, below), and the matter seems now less clear-cut. While there is good evidence of strong atmospheric pollution in southern England by late June 1783 – most famously in Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*, Letter CIX – there is little evidence for respiratory disease. The extreme heat of that summer (possibly caused by a short-lived greenhouse effect from increased atmospheric CO₂ and SO₂) would have induced illnesses such as fits, strokes and heart attacks, and also digestive tract diseases caused by accelerated putrefaction of meat and other food. Some of these could produce feverish symptoms consistent with the prescription of bark. The 'Plague Ague' (possibly Lyme's disease, spread by ticks) might also have

figured, though it is more likely to affect agricultural labourers than gentry such as the Fishers and Hesses – especially as the latter lived in London.

In short, we know that James Hesse the elder died after a brief fever, which may be related to digestive tract diseases or even Lyme's disease, and Jeffery Fisher most probably died from another stroke, possibly brought on by the heat. So while it is possible that the deaths commemorated at Maulden were caused directly or indirectly by the Laki eruption, there can unfortunately be no certainty. The fact that expenditure on medicines and medical care is absent from the accounts for the first 7 months of 1783 may increase the likelihood of this, but cannot be conclusive.

RICHARD MORGAN

Further reading and acknowledgements

Unpublished paper: Linda McArdeell and Prof Stephen Self, 'Bedfordshire 1780–1786 Mortality Analysis', kindly communicated to me by Ms McArdeell.

C S Witham, C Oppenheimer, 'Mortality in England during the 1783–84 Laki Craters Eruption' (2005) 67 *Bulletin of Volcanology* 15–26.

I am particularly grateful to Ms McArdeell for her assistance.

The Dillys of Southill, Dr Johnson and Admiral Byng

It has been stated that Dr Johnson composed the epitaph on the tomb of the executed Admiral Byng in Southill Church, damning the Whig government of the Duke of Newcastle. But what is the evidence for this?

Printing and publishing at the beginning of the eighteenth century was free from state control and book printing and publishing began to flourish when the Copyright Act of 1709 was passed. Energetic booksellers were commissioning new works, either in combination with others or singly. At this time a 'bookseller' was an entrepreneur who financed and commissioned books in addition to selling them.

Bedfordshire gave birth to two notable London bookseller brothers. Edward Dilly (1732–1779), was born on 25 July 1732 at Southill, the second son of Thomas Dilly, a yeoman farmer. Edward's younger brother Charles Dilly (1739–1807) also became a bookseller in partnership with his brother.

Edward's elder brother, John Dilly (1731–1806), looked after the estate at Southill and lived in the house known now as Yew Tree Farm. The Dilly family had lived there for at least two centuries.

Edward, apprenticed to the London bookseller John Oswald on 6 December 1748, came out of his time on 11 June 1754. In the same year he took over Oswald's shop at 22 Poultry, which stayed in the family until the 1800s.

Charles was apprenticed to Edward in 1756 and ended his apprenticeship on 7 June 1763, becoming a liveryman of the Stationers' Company on that day and a junior partner in the successful business in 1764. Titles handled by the firm included religious, historical, medical, legal, philosophical, mathematical, and literary works and dissenting and 'American' books. Edward was known as 'a Bookseller of great

eminence'. He also had interests in a number of newspapers and was a generous literary patron.

Charles described his brother as 'a good-natured and well-disposed man . . . the useful man in business', but said he had 'false ideas in politics'. It was also said that 'Politics is his constant theme, and he will force one's attention whether one will give it or not'. Edward was a loyal supporter of John Wilkes, fiercely pro-American and a fairly competent political writer.

The brothers had a wide circle of friends.¹ Edward was 'a man of great pleasantry of manners; and so fond of conversation, that he almost literally talked himself to death'. Another said that Edward was 'one of the greatest talkers I ever met with, tongue, hands, and head all moving at a time with so much rapidity that I wonder how his lungs sustain it'.

The brothers gave authors maximum support and practically adopted James Boswell. They both lived and worked at the bookshop in the Poultry, which was a centre for social, political and literary figures.

One of their close friends was Samuel Johnson (1709–1784). In 1737 Johnson had travelled to London in company with David Garrick to establish himself as a writer. After nearly 18 years of struggle his genius was recognised at about the time Edward Dilly took over Oswald's shop and, in the following year, 1755, Johnson's *English Dictionary* was published. From then on, Dr Johnson was at the centre of the literary life of London.

We do not know how soon after this the Dillys became acquainted with Johnson or when he first visited Southill, but it is known that he went with James Boswell on several occasions. Boswell records:

'On Saturday, June 2 [1781], I set out for Scotland, and had promised to pay a visit . . . at Southill in Bedfordshire at the hospitable mansion of Squire Dilly, the elder brother of my worthy friends, the booksellers in the Poultry. Dr Johnson agreed to be of the party . . . [and] found himself very happy at Squire Dilly's where there is always abundance of excellent fare, and hearty welcome. On Tuesday, June 5, Johnson was to return to London . . . I accompanied him in Mr Dilly's chaise to Shefford . . .

The Dilly brothers' dinner parties, were not limited to those who shared their religious or political beliefs. Dr Johnson was often a guest, as on 7 May 1773 when Boswell and Johnson dined with them in the Poultry with Oliver Goldsmith. In 1776 Boswell mischievously engineered a meeting between Johnson and John Wilkes, whom he thought would be obnoxious to Johnson, at the Dilly's, but the evening passed pleasantly, mainly due to Wilkes being very attentive to Johnson.

Southill House was the seat of the Byng family and the very unlucky Admiral John Byng was born there in 1704, the fifth son of George Byng, Viscount Torrington (1663–1733). John Byng joined the navy in 1718 and by July 1747, was Vice-Admiral of the Blue. At the beginning of 1756, the Whig Government was warned that the French were about to seize Minorca and, on 17 March, Byng was ordered to Portsmouth to prepare his ships. Nine of his 13 ships were very short of men and some were old and leaky and his orders were unclear. He

reached Gibraltar on 2 May, but the French had landed in Minorca and the last British garrison, St Philip's Fort, was under siege.

When he sailed to Minorca on 8 May, St Philip's Fort was still British but they did not reply to his signals. The French were sighted on 19 May, and Byng chased them. Light winds meant that the fleets did not engage until 20 May. Byng's captains did not know his plans and his signals were ineffective, but he attacked. After the battle, Byng's older ships were wrecked or badly damaged. He called a council of war on 24 May with his captains and army officers. They all agreed to return to Gibraltar to defend it against attack.

Byng arrived in Gibraltar on 20 June, previously having sent a dispatch to London. On 2 July, Vice-Admiral Hawke arrived to replace him and to send him to England. Before Byng's dispatch arrived, the Government had received and adopted a French account of the battle.

At Spithead on 26 July 1756 Byng was arrested. The Government, embarrassed by the loss of Minorca and the surrender on 29 June of St Philip's Fort, were determined that Byng should be a scapegoat. His dispatch was censored before publication and he was the subject of pamphlets, newspaper articles and ballads.

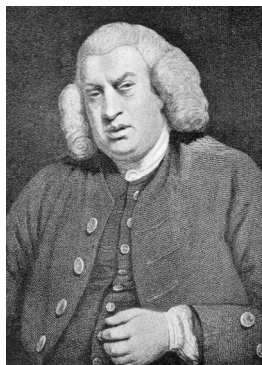
At his court-martial on HMS *St George* in Portsmouth Harbour on 27 December 1756, some of Byng's captains and colleagues tried to blame him, but his cross-examination revealed their share in the débâcle. He was sure of acquittal and felt he had done his best but the superiority of the French and the poor condition of some of his ships had prevented him from doing more.

On 27 January 1757, Byng was found guilty. He fell within the definition of cowardice and negligence in engaging the enemy. This meant a death sentence, but the court asked the Government and Admiralty for mercy. George II received a petition from the Admiral's supporters, and this delayed his execution from 28 February to 14 March. On that day Admiral Byng was shot on HMS *Monarch* at Portsmouth and buried in the family vault at Southill. He was made an example of, as Voltaire said, 'pour encourager les autres' or, more likely, to exonerate the Government.

It is said that Dr Johnson was incensed by Byng's execution. Johnson was a staunch Tory and violently opposed to the Whigs. Among his comments were: 'the first Whig was the Devil'; 'Whiggism is the negation of all principle'; 'Sir, he is a cursed Whig, a *bottomless* Whig'. The epitaph reads:

To the Perpetual Disgrace
of PUBLICK JUSTICE
The Hon^{ble}: JOHN BYNG Esq^r
Admiral of the Blue
Fell a MARTYR to
POLITICAL PERSECUTION
March 14th: in the Year 1757 when
BRAVERY and LOYALTY
were Insufficient Securities
For the Life and Honour
of a
NAVAL OFFICER.

It seems reasonable, in view of his connection with the Dillys and visits to Southill, that Johnson was well known to the Byngs and he shared their sense of injustice and thus wrote the epitaph. Boswell in his *Life* reproduces a letter by the Hon John Byng² in 1784, detailing Johnson's approach to death. Thus the Byngs, many years after the execution, were still solicitous towards and interested in Johnson.



Dr Johnson

The Dilly brothers remained bachelors, living at the shop in the Poultry but with a country house near Hemel Hempstead. They were regular visitors to Southill. Edward died from consumption on 11 May 1779 at Southill, and was buried in the churchyard; there is a memorial tablet in the church.

Charles Dilly, the junior partner, then carried on the business in his own name but the firm did not change. Politically more moderate than his brother, he was also pro-American, supporting the colonies during the independence struggle. He was master of the Stationers' Company, 1802–03.

In January 1800 Charles Dilly sold the firm to Joseph Mawman of York and retired to Clophill. But he returned to London in 1802. An 'oppression of breath' afflicted him on 3 May 1807 at Ramsgate, and he died there on 4 May. He was buried on 12 May at St George the Martyr, Queen Square, London. His estate of nearly £60,000 passed mainly to maternal relations.

TED MARTIN

Notes

1. They were Americans or had strong connections or sympathies with America: John Wilkes (1727–1797), MP, political reformer and scourge of the British establishment; Catharine Macaulay (1731–1791), English historian; Benjamin Rush (1745?–1813), American physician and politician; Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), American printer, philosopher, scientist and statesman (both of these were signatories of the Declaration of Independence); James Oglethorpe (1696–1785), English philanthropist, founder of Georgia and Savannah (1733).

2. The Hon John Byng (b 1743), younger son of George Byng, 3rd Viscount Torrington, and Admiral John Byng's nephew. Known for his diaries of journeys through England and Wales by horse 1781–1794 (some available online); became 5th Viscount Torrington in December 1812, died in London in January 1813.

Sources and further reading

Ashworth, Kenneth, revised by McCartney, C, *A Short History and Guide*, The Parish Church of All Saints, Southill, 1994.

Boswell, James, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL D* (Charles Dilly, 1791; many editions since, thought to be one of the greatest biographies in English literature).

Dover, R T A, *The Tragedy of Admiral Byng, 1757*, Friends of Southill Church, 2007.

Timperley, C H, *Encyclopaedia of Literary and Typographical Anecdote*, H G Bohn, 1862.

Internet and biographical dictionaries.

Book review

Villagers: 750 Years of Life in an English Village, by James Brown. Amberley Publishing, Cirencester Road, Chalford, Stroud, Glos, GL6 8PE. ISBN 978-1-4456-0347-6. 256pp, paperback, £16.99.

James Brown's life's hobby is researching the history of his native village. His first book, *Gamlingay*, was published in 1989. After 20 years he thought he 'hadn't known the half of it' so rewrote the original book, adding new material.

Gamlingay is the largest village in west Cambridgeshire but seems never to have belonged to the county, 'jutting pugnaciously into Bedfordshire' with a postal address 'Near Sandy, Bedfordshire'. It never had a resident local squire, one of the largest landowners being Merton College, Oxford.

James Brown presents us with a history of the village and its people from the middle ages to the present day. Any rural idyll is relegated to Constable paintings and Wordsworth and he tells of the poverty, back-breaking labour and oppression of the rural population up to the early nineteenth century, which time he declares to be worse for them than the middle ages. Anyone who has read E P Thompson's book on the English working class will agree with him.

The chapters on the Manorial System and life on the manor are excellent and informative reading. The author also covers the role of the church, local disputes, the way of death, wills, furnishings and the standard of homes, dissenters in the village, rogues and paupers, 'Captain Swing', the severity of punishment for minor offences (a villager transported to Australia for stealing a duck worth 1s (5p)), enclosure of the fields, fires, agricultural reform and the poor law. The story is brought up to date in the final chapters.

Everyone will find something here of interest: the Downings who gave their name to *that* street in London; John Bunyan gave a lift to a young woman on his horse and both got into trouble for it; how Bedfordshire's riots against the Militia Act spilled into Gamlingay in 1757; and the stories of Emily Shore and Margaret Gardiner.

But where are the photographs? Even the smallest history publication is today replete with them to add to the interpretation and enjoyment of the text. There are none here, just some good maps.

Production values are good: a nice typeface (Sabon), quality paper (on which photos could have been printed), good printing and a stout binding. The page margins are too small at the foot and I spotted about four minor errors. The index is split into subjects, persons and places, which is *not* helpful to the reader. It is also spaced out to fill the allotted pages but there are none of the usual continuation lines at column and page breaks, which is also unhelpful.

This book is an easy, interesting, informative and entertaining read, and the author is to be congratulated on his industry and skill. Highly recommended. * * * *

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