

*These three short pieces have been researched and written by Vic Harrup, local historian, and co-author with Margaret Poulter and Valerie Potter of our Orford Museum publication The Making of a Borough. Vic is a long-standing contributor to the Orford & District History Bulletin and these pieces are the results of many years of research and immersion in the history of this area. They clearly illustrate the hardships and cruelties endured by many of the people living in East Suffolk in those not-so-distant times.*

## The Coroner's Inquests

Coroners for the Liberty of St Etheldreda were not responsible for Orford, which appointed its own coroner. He probably covered Sudbourne too, since neither town nor village appear in the documents preserved in Ipswich Record Office. Jurors were chosen from among prominent village men and the inquest usually held in a place in the village, often the public house.

A number of inquests in the 19<sup>th</sup> century involved people living in Butley or the adjoining villages. Some were suicides of men in their 60s, others were very young children and others were accidents to working men.

Two children suffered terrible deaths within two years of each other, and both lived in Butley Street. The inquest on Lydia Aldrich was held in the Oyster in 1839. Her parents, Mary and Noah, were both at work and she and another child were left in a downstairs room where a fire was burning. Her clothes caught fire, and although she lingered for nine days, eventually she died.

Elizabeth Barham lived with her family next to the shop. She was 22 months old in 1841, and she had a sister, Emma, aged four, who slept in the same bedroom as her grandfather, Harry Barham, who told the inquest jurors the story of Elizabeth's accidental death. The cottage was over-run with mice, and arsenic, obtained from Mr Cockerell of Wantisden, spread on bread and butter, had been placed at the door of one of the bedrooms.

The children's father, John, had gone to work and 'in the muddle' caused by the chimney sweep coming earlier than expected the poison was forgotten. It transpired that Emma had given the fatal piece of bread to her sister to eat. An emetic, agrimony wine, was obtained from the shop, as was castor oil, but neither helped. The doctor, called 48 hours later, declared it to be a 'hopeless case'.

Another child who died painfully was George Denny, aged four, who fell into a tub of beer in the making, and

was scalded. He was the son of Julia and Eli Denny, a gamekeeper in Butley. In was in 1888, and George had just returned from school and his mother had placed two tubs outside the back door to cool. He fell backwards into one of them, and although his mother pulled him out and removed his clothes he was too badly injured and died the following day.

That same year Thomas Page, aged nine, had to give evidence at another inquest in Butley. He told the jurors that his father, also Thomas, had threatened to kill himself and the boy had removed a razor and 'hid it up'. However his father had hanged himself instead, and he was found by another son, Frederick, who was a backhouse boy at Wantisden. The father, who was aged 62, had had a bad foot for 12 months and had been in low spirits since the death of his wife four years previously.

Children were in danger both in the fields and at home. Elizabeth Reeve was only four when, in November 1851, she and other children were burning spear grass. John Lewis was digging on his allotment when he heard Elizabeth shriek. Her clothing had caught fire and although the fire was quickly extinguished and the child taken to John Crosby's cottage, she died soon after. John Crosby was her grandfather and was probably supposed to be looking after her since her parents lived at Blaxhall.

John Levett was a marshman, aged 63, working for Stephen Oxborrow of Capel, when he was killed by a bullock. In a statement James Smith said he had known the dead man for 40 years and had lived under the same roof for ten. James had eaten supper with his son William and they had gone to bed when Mrs Levett woke them to say her husband was lying on a barley straw stack. He was not dead and told them it had been an accident with one of the beasts. The beast 'drove the victuals quite out of his mouth, and he thought he flew at least a rod'. He lingered only a few days.

The inquest on George Smith took place in 1897. He was described as a horseman of Capel St. Andrew, and was aged 39 when the accident happened. It was