

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### Geoffrey Robinson, Misery and Misfortune – Sudden deaths in Suffolk in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Geoffrey Robinson gave a very interesting talk to the November meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall about sudden deaths in Suffolk in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He entitled the presentation *Misery and Misfortune* which tends to characterise the hazards facing people at that time as concerns about safety had a very low priority within the society, unlike today.

Accidents causing death were commonplace in Suffolk in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Many occurred in the home. The children of the labouring classes were particularly vulnerable. An inquest in 1844 heard that a 21 month old child was badly burned by the kitchen fire when its mother left the room. Families were often too poor to buy a fire guard or mothers were too busy with household tasks and the children to remember to use it.

Juries at inquests rarely attributed blame for sudden deaths. A six year old girl in Benhall died from burns while her mother was in an adjoining village. Eight years later a three year old boy in the same family burnt to death in his mother's absence. In both cases a verdict of accidental death was recorded and no blame was attached to the woman. In modern times this would have been regarded as neglect.

There was almost a fatalism about death in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, possibly reflect the strength of religion at the time. In 1826 19 year old Sarah Hayward was found dead in bed. Her inquest gave the cause as, 'A sudden visitation of God.' Gradually, this explanation was challenged. William Farr, who was responsible for the General Register Office from 1837, devised more specific categories for the causes of death so that statistics could be analysed to improve public health. This system is still used today.

Some deaths were viewed as bad luck or carelessness. In 1864 Phoebe Newson died after she was stung in the throat by a wasp while eating a pie. In 1827 Mr Simpson, a farmer at Stoke by Nayland, and his grandson died when arsenic contaminated flour that was placed on the same shelf. Elizabeth Leach, aged six, died under the wheels of a hearse at Earl Soham in 1801. She was scrabbling for a coin thrown by the hearse driver after she had opened a gate for him. Other accidents involved drowning. Similarly, the increasing use of machinery in agriculture led to deaths. In 1847 John Madden aged 20 died at a windmill when his jacket got caught in the cogs and Henry Tuffin died after slipping into a threshing machine in 1868 at Horringer. There were also accidents on the railway caused by trains being shunted and children gathering coal which had fallen from trains.

Inquests were held into sudden deaths. The coroner held the role for life and combined this duty with other employment. They were often solicitors but had little medical experience. The main requisites for coroners were discretion, tact, common sense and an understanding of human nature. The inquest was convened within 48 hours of the death. They were often held at pubs. Between 12 and 23 local men formed the jury. They began by examining the body of the deceased. Then the coroner and jurymen questioned witnesses. A medical practitioner was present to explain the cause of death. It was unusual to conduct post mortems. The jury gave the verdict and their judgement was final.

At the end of the talk, Geoffrey explained that he had started to research such a macabre subject when he came across the tragic death of a girl in 1875 at Bedfield School which is near to where he lives. Her dress caught fire in the school room and she ran out into the playground. Her suffering was witnessed by all of the other children. It affected him and must have had a huge impact on the other pupils in an age when counselling was not available or deemed necessary.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 27 November when Geoffrey Kay will give a talk entitled *The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, [www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net).

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