



News and events

- Welwyn Hatfield Museum Service, WAS and the Young Archaeologists Club have been awarded an HLF grant of £9,600 towards **a research project based on the Dicket Mead villa site** (the Roman bath-house under the A1). This will involve some geophysics, digging some test pits, and going through some of the finds from the original excavations, ending with a display at Mill Green Museum in Oct/Nov 2020. If you would like to help, contact Kris Lockyear at noviodunum@hotmail.com
- The **Herts Association for Local History** Spring Meeting and AGM will be held on Saturday 18 May at Pirton Village Hall with a programme of short talks, book presentations and the Lionel Munby Memorial Lecture. Details at www.halh.org.uk
- **Next meeting:** Our next meeting will be at 7.30 on Wednesday 19 June when Kate Harwood will tell us about *O'Connorville: Hertfordshire's Chartist Land Colony*.

Notes and queries

The story of Thomas Cockle

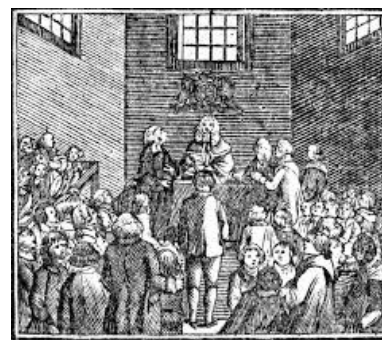
A document in the National Archive has thrown light on a fascinating but previously unknown story about Wheathampstead in the 18th century.

The document was a petition for clemency from the rector, church-wardens and overseers of the poor. The petition, dated 31 March 1787, was sent to the Hertford Assizes on behalf of Thomas Cockle who was described as a 'small farmer' of Wheathampstead. He had been found guilty of stealing five sheep and three lambs from a farmer in Hemel Hempstead. The petitioners asked for mercy on the grounds that Thomas Cockle had a wife and five young children. It was his first offence and he was described as a hard worker.

The petition was turned down and Thomas Cockle was hanged a fortnight later at Gallows Hill, Hertford. Why was he executed for such an apparently trivial offence? The answer lies in the Georgian legal system that was particularly harsh when it came to crimes against property. The death sentence was given to anybody who stole goods worth more than 2/6d. The sheep that Thomas Cockle took were valued at nearly £5.

Despite the severity of the legal code the death sentence was not always carried out. Two out of every three prisoners received a reprieve, often being sentenced to transportation instead. So why was Thomas Cockle executed? The answer

is that certain categories of crime were seen as being particularly serious. Livestock theft was one



of them. Three other men were hanged at Hertford in 1787. Two had committed highway robbery and one was a burglar. Anyone caught committing these types of property crime

was likely to end up on the scaffold.

What happened to Thomas Cockle's wife and children? Thomas Cockle appears to have had no previous links to Wheathampstead but his wife Mary was born in the village in 1750. Thomas Cockle was her second husband. She had married Samuel Ellis in 1773 and had two daughters, Rebecca and Ann. Her first husband died in 1779 and Mary married Thomas Cockle in the same year. Her daughter Rebecca had also died in 1779 and so Mary brought one daughter, Ann, into the new marriage. She had two sons and two daughters by her new husband. After Thomas was executed Mary reverted to her maiden name of Wingrove but died in Wheathampstead two years later at the age of 39. Four of her children survived her; at least three of them must have been less than 10 years old.

Research by Mike Smith and Suzie Brind