

From The Folly to the Old Bailey

By Dianne Payne

A tragic tale, which opens a window onto the lives of the labouring poor of north-west Hertfordshire at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Folly, part way between Harpenden and Wheathampstead, appears for the first time on the 1766 Dury and Andrews map of Hertfordshire as an area of open parkland. Ribbon Hall is marked on this map just west of The Folly, not far from the site of the present Lea House, 204 Lower Luton Road. Hall houses were 16th century traditional timber-framed dwellings built for yeoman holding and cultivating small landed estates and in 1820 and 1823 the son and daughter of a labourer of Ribbon Hall were baptized from there at St Helen's Church in Wheathampstead.

The 1841 census does not include Ribbon Hall so by then it could have fallen into decay or been demolished. But seven cottages are recorded on The Folly with 27 residents, agricultural labourers and their families. A decade later, these cottages had probably been demolished too as their residents can be traced to properties elsewhere. The 1851 census records just two dwellings on The Folly with new residents, who remained there for at least twenty years. These dwellings, the first of the Victorian cottages built gradually from 1850, now form the basis of Folly Fields. Lea House, now Grade II listed, was built on The Folly in 1870 and the foundations of the original seven cottages recorded in the 1841 census can be traced on the front lawn.

Rural poverty and petty crime

One of these early cottages was rented by Elisha Allen and it was there that his daughter, Amelia, gave birth to Reuben, the son of Charles Dunham, in 1842. After his birth, Amelia and Charles, an agricultural labourer, moved to the rural hamlet of East Hyde, four miles away, where Reuben and his younger brother grew up.

Historians agree that agricultural labourers were the worst paid, worst fed and worst housed of all the working communities. During the course of their life-cycle, most labouring families were compelled to adopt strategies of 'makeshift' to remain solvent. These included thrift in the purchase of food, discontinuing children's schooling, relying on charity or support from relatives and neighbours, and petty crime. In 1847, Charles Dunham stole wood, perhaps for fuel or to repair his property, and was committed to Bedford prison. The 1851 census shows Reuben, aged nine, as an agricultural labourer, making his contribution to the family income at an early age.

By 1861 Reuben had left home and in 1863 he married Eliza Hale from Hamwell/Amwell, a tiny hamlet to the south-west of Wheathampstead. A year later their first child, Eliza, was born but before long Reuben resorted to petty crime and was arrested for night poaching on the land of Lionel Ames JP of Luton. He was found not guilty but the Poaching Prevention Act of 1862 empowered police to stop and search suspects and in Hertfordshire there were

over 300 poaching convictions in 1869 alone. That year Reuben was charged with poaching and stealing turnips, which carried a sentence of two months' imprisonment. The following February he served another month in prison for stealing a ferret, used for poaching rabbits.

Agricultural Labourers Union



Agricultural labourers c1880
Ancestry.com

In 1872 a survey showed that the average weekly wage for agricultural labourers in Hertfordshire was between 10 and 12 shillings a week. Unions were being formed across the country, aiming to improve general conditions. Meetings were held at Harpenden, St Albans and Luton, attracting hundreds of workers, many of whom joined the Union. On the evening of 6 June 1872 at a gathering of 500 on No Man's Land Common near Wheathampstead, labourers recounted their experiences and difficulties. Rev Owen Davys, the Rector of Wheathampstead, spoke in favour of labourers getting more money but he antagonised the audience by saying that many earning only 12 shillings a week spent as much as 3 shillings of that in public houses. He hoped that if they obtained an increase they would spend it at the shops of the butcher and baker. The meeting ended with three cheers for the Union.

Reuben and Eliza rented a cottage on the Common and may have attended this meeting but they were facing other serious concerns. On 8 July 1872 Reuben appeared at the Hertfordshire Assizes charged with poaching and carrying a gun and was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment. Eliza, a straw plaiter with her second child, was left to cope alone.

While Reuben was in prison, local farmers and land-owners ignored requests from agricultural labourers for a pay increase or further discussion so on 18 April 1873 about a third of the men from Sandridge withdrew their labour and drew strike pay from the Union. Charles Higby Lattimore, a farmer of 360 acres whose family owned the Hope Brewery in Wheathampstead, recommended that Union members be given a week's notice, claiming

that there was little difference between a Unionist and a highwayman. His proposals were supported and most of the strikers were sacked. The National Agricultural Labourers' Union helped the dismissed men find new work and some accepted the offer of a Free Pass to migrate to northern counties, where wages were between 20 to 30 shillings per week.

Migration to Derbyshire for better wages in the 1870s

When Reuben was released from prison, he and Eliza joined others from the Harpenden and Wheathampstead area, who also took up this offer and migrated to Basford near Ilkeston in Derbyshire. Wages were higher there because some agricultural workers had left the land to work in the mills. Reuben and Eliza remained there until 1879 and, with higher wages, did not need to use illegal means to make ends meet. This was a more stable period of their lives and while they were in Ilkeston they had four more children. They then returned to Wheathampstead and settled in one of the twelve cottages in East Lane. Reuben found work as a gravel digger and they had two more children. But on 18 October 1887, he appeared at the St Albans Quarter Sessions accused of felony, an assault in an attempt to steal, and in 1890 local newspapers carried reports of his further appearances at the Petty Sessions.

Reuben's mental breakdown

Reuben's eldest daughter, Eliza, had sought employment in domestic service in London, where she met Herbert Benjamin Williams, a maker of American organs. In 1891 the family came together for their marriage at St Helen's Church in Wheathampstead. Soon after the marriage Reuben's relationship with his wife broke down.



Three Counties Asylum
Richard Knight

Alone and desperate, he may have had a mental breakdown for in 1893 he was admitted as an inmate to The Three Counties Asylum, near Arlesey, Bedfordshire.

He remained there a few months but got away without leave and was found wandering in Luton by the police.

Trial at The Old Bailey

Subsequent events can be pieced together from newspaper reports and evidence given at The Old Bailey.



A trial at the Old Bailey before the Lord Chief Justice
Illustration for Living London edited by George Sims (c 1900).

By 1899 he had returned home to Wheathampstead but his wife felt under threat and on 14 February she sought protection with her daughter, Eliza Williams, in Islington. In court Eliza described the family tensions that had arisen:

I never had any reason to complain against my father, but he had not been a kind father to me – he threatened me before. On 14 February my mother came to me for protection from my father, and I let her stay here awhile – she asked me to go to her home to get some of her things – my father came home while I was there; he told me to leave the things alone, and he insulted me, calling me dreadful names, and threatening to take my life – I had to get protection; I went to the Police-court and took out a summons against him – he lives at Wheathampstead, East Lane.

DONE IN "COLD BLOOD."

At Clerkenwell to-day, Reuben Dunham, 59, carpenter, Wheathampton, Heris, was remanded, charged with attempting to murder Eliza Williams and her husband by stabbing them with a knife. When arrested, and the doctor had pronounced Mrs. Williams' wounds serious, the accused expressed the wish that he had killed her. She had, he said, broken up his home, and he had done the deed in cold blood.

Report of the attack on Eliza and Herbert Williams
Bath Chronicle, 23 Feb 1899

Soon afterwards, after walking much of the way from Wheathampstead, Reuben arrived in London, where on 22 February a serious incident took place. The following April in the court at The Old Bailey Eliza Williams gave her account of what happened:

About 8.40 am on February 22nd I was in bed with my husband; he is the occupier of the house, and we have three rooms there—we sleep in the back room, and there are folding-doors—I heard someone turn the handle of the bedroom door—I called out, 'Who is there?'—I received no answer—I called out again, and immediately the door was broken open, and my father entered the room—he took hold of my right hand, then commenced swearing—he said I was like my dirty — mother - then he took this large knife (produced) from his pocket and plunged it into my side, and then pushed it in further—as I was getting over the bed I received another stab in my left breast—my husband rushed round the bed to get hold of my father, but my father pushed him under the mantel-piece, and I saw him try to rip my husband's stomach open—I caught hold of the knife and pulled it on one side, and was holding it, when my father pulled it through my hand, which was cut; he then pulled us out of the room into the passage—he is a very powerful man, and my husband had only just got up from a bed of sickness—I saw Mrs. Charlton, and said, 'My father has stabbed me in the side'; she opened the street-door and called for help—our room is on the level with the street—we all fell down in the passage, and I do not remember anything else—after a time I recovered, and was attended by a medical man.

William Kershaw, a doctor, was called at about 8.55 am and at the trial gave an account of his involvement:

I found a female patient on the bed at the house, in a semi-collapsed state—the bed-clothes were very much disarranged, and there was a good deal of blood on them, and also on her nightdress—I found a wound in the upper part of her left breast, and another just below the breast bone; each of them was 1 1/2 in. long—the upper one was about half an inch deep—it was a gaping wound—the lower one had penetrated the abdominal wall—it was by far the more serious of the two—the omentum was cut—it was dangerous because of the liability of hemorrhage and peritonitis—More force was used in the wound in the stomach than in the breast—if she had not been a stout woman it might have been serious. Mrs. Williams was confined to her bed till March 17th.

Reuben Dunham was remanded in custody at Holloway Prison from 28 February to await his trial and kept under observation by James Scott, the medical officer, who told the court, 'I have no reason to suppose that he is a lunatic.' In his defence Reuben said he thought his daughter was going to take all his things away, that he had been drinking for 9 or 10 days, and that he was very sorry for what he had done.

Sentenced to penal servitude



Dartmoor prison about 1900 - Prisoners on a work party.
Devon Heritage Centre

The Jury declared him guilty but recommended him to mercy as he had been confined to a lunatic asylum. He then pleaded guilty to a conviction of felony on 18 October 1887 and as there were other convictions also proved against him over a period of twenty years, he was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude. The 1901 census shows him in Dartmoor Prison, Princetown, Devon, but there are no further details about his time there or the regime under which he was imprisoned as most of the records held at the prison were destroyed in a riot in the 1930s, when the administration block was burnt out.

About six months after the trial, Herbert Benjamin Williams, who had 'only just got up from a bed of sickness' at the time of the assault, died at the age of 34. Eliza managed to maintain his business and organ manufacture continued at her home until about 1904.

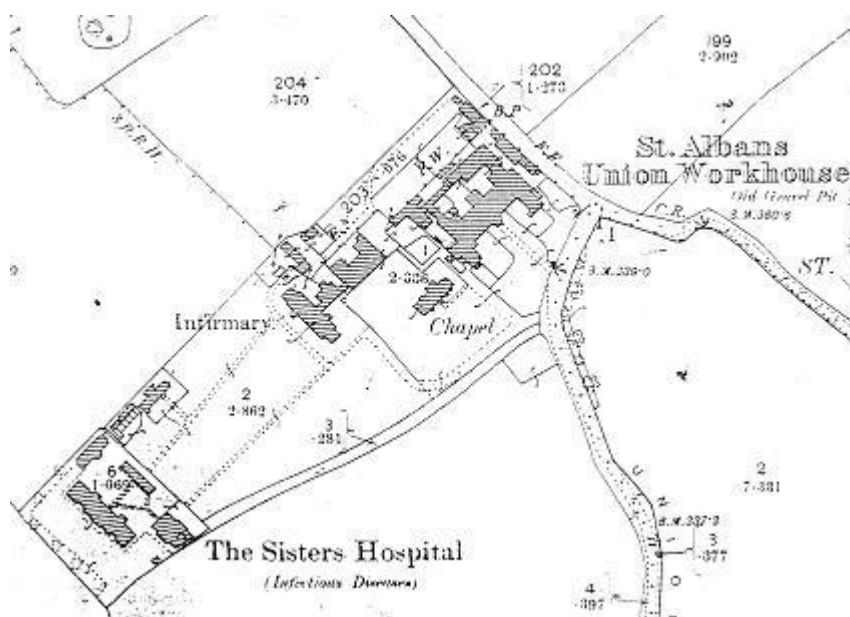
Impoverished in Wheathampstead

In Wheathampstead members of Reuben's family continued to live in East Lane, occupying three cottages next door to each other. His wife and children were among the poorest in the village, employed in labouring or menial occupations with little hope of advancement. Over a period of 23 years, Reuben and Eliza had 10 children, 7 of whom survived to adulthood but when he was released from Dartmoor in about 1906 he returned home to find his family sadly depleted. During his absence three of his children, all under the age of 27, had died, leaving their spouses with young children. His wife died in 1910 and the 1911 census shows him living alone in East Lane, where his eldest son, Charles, still had a cottage. For a number of years his daughter, Ada, had been employed by Canon Davys as a cook at St Helen's

Rectory. She married in 1904 and lived with her family at The Gables, Bury Green, Wheathampstead but died in 1912, at the age of 32. Reuben outlived at least seven of his children. From 1909 he would have been entitled to an old age pension of 5 shillings a week but still had to work as a labourer to maintain himself.

In their declining years all members of poor communities feared dependency on the parish because of sickness or misfortune. Workhouses were grim places but for those with poor health or without family support were often the final destination. Reuben's mother, Amelia Dunham, who gave birth to him in The Folly, had been widowed twice. After her son's trial, she lived alone but by 1901 she was a pauper inmate of Luton Union Workhouse. By 1911 she was no longer an 'inmate' but a 'patient' in the workhouse infirmary, where she died in 1913, aged 93.

Eliza Williams, Reuben's eldest daughter, now 44 and widowed, was unable to continue her husband's business in London. Either financial problems or ill health left her dependant on the parish where she was born and by 1911 she was an inmate of the Union Workhouse in St Albans.



St Albans Union Workhouse, at the junction of Normandy Road with Waverley Road. Later most buildings were incorporated into St Albans City Hospital.
www.workhouses.org.uk

Seven years' penal servitude may not have been the fate of the majority of agricultural labourers but Reuben's experiences of poverty, childhood employment, migration in search of higher wages, a large family to support and involvement in petty crime, were typical experiences of many nineteenth-century agricultural labourers.

Reuben's final years in the village



Wheathampstead Fire Brigade c 1912

Source: *Wheathampstead History in Pictures*, 4. www.wheathampstead.net

Two brief glimpses of Reuben's final years in Wheathampstead have come to light. The first is in a photograph of the local Fire Brigade in about 1912, where he is named as the older man standing on the extreme right alongside C Collins with the horses. The second is a recorded conversation between Mr C Collins and Mr F Harding, ('Wick' and 'Termino'), as they reminisced about life in Wheathampstead village:

'Do you recollect the time there was a circus in Swan yard? - Reuben Dunham and the baboon? Not a real baboon but a man got up like one in a cage, and a shilling a time to see it and a sovereign for he who dared to open the cage door and go inside. Nobody dared, because this baboon-man would growl and make out it was really fierce. But Reuben Dunham came across - I fancy he had been in the Swan for his glass of beer - and he went straight up to the cage door and terrifies the life out of this baboon; in the end they had to give him the sovereign to get him to go away!

These brief sightings suggest that Reuben Dunham was accepted back into the local community and was capable of living alone. He was not a lunatic or considered a threat, although he may have been regarded as a 'character' in the village. He was listed on the register of Absent Voters in 1918 and 1919, normally associated with those absent for First World War service, but in his case recording his absence from his cottage in East Lane. He died in August 1922 at the age of 80 in the district of St Albans. Whether he succumbed to the Union Workhouse is currently unknown.

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