

Did the Parish Register Really Say That?

A fun look at unexpected entries in English parish registers

Provided by Dan Poffenberger, a Legacy Tree genealogist, <http://legacy-tree.com>

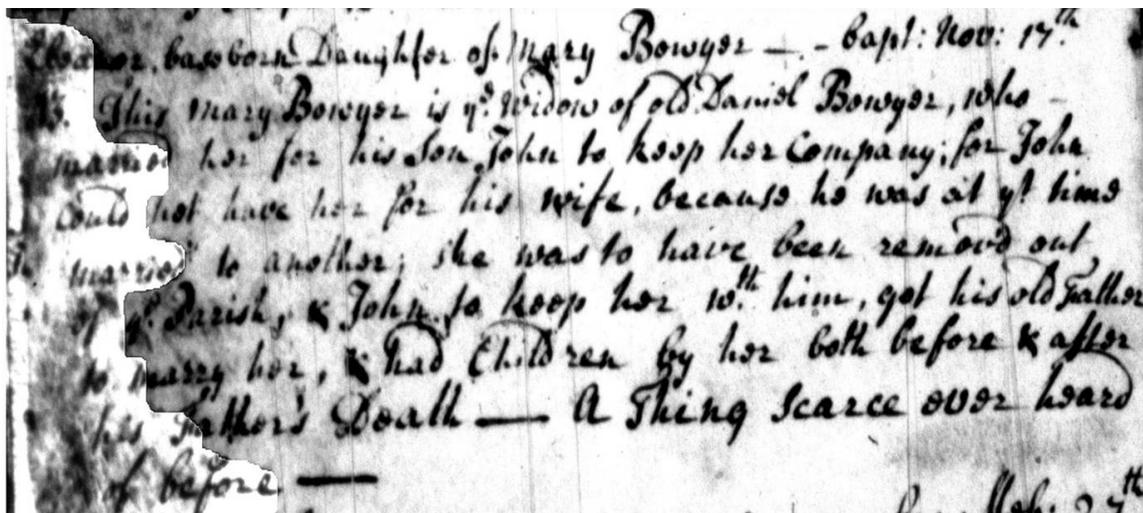
Church of England parish registers can begin as early as 1538. There were about 11,000 “ancient” parishes in England by the early 1800s, most with their own rector, vicar, or curate and their own clerks. The clerk’s job was to enter the offices, as they were called, or in other words, christenings, marriages and burials occurring within the parish, among other records which were kept.

Sometimes, the clerk (pronounced “clark”) gave more information than just the typical names, dates and occasional places and occupations. Here is a small sampling of the ones I’ve collected over the years . . . with perhaps a comment of my own.

I’m guessing that old Daniel Bowyer of Chilton Cantelo, Somerset had no idea the situation in which he would someday find himself because of his son. The Chilton Cantelo parish register records the christening of Eleanor, the base-born daughter of Mary Bowyer. It then adds this note:

“This Mary Bowyer is the widow of old Daniel Bowyer, who married her for his son to keep her company; for John could not have her for his wife, because he was at that time married to another; she was to have been removed out of the parish, & John, to keep her with him, got his old father to marry her, & had children by her both before & after his father’s death – a thing scarce ever heard of before”

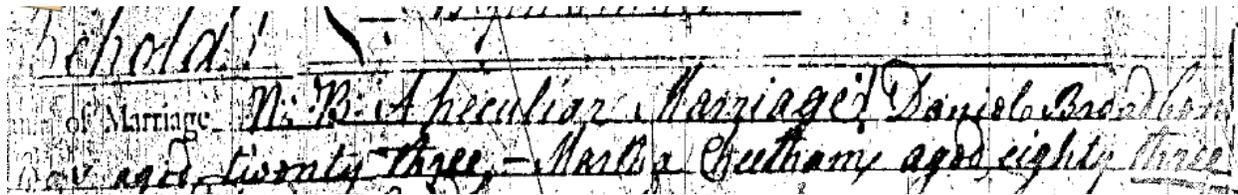
Here is the actual entry:¹



I wonder how John approached his father on this one . . . “Hey Dad, I have this situation and I was wondering . . .”

¹ Church of England. Parish Church of Chilton-Cantelo (Somersetshire) Baptism Register, 1714-1812. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1988). FHL Film# 1526507 Items 44 – 46.

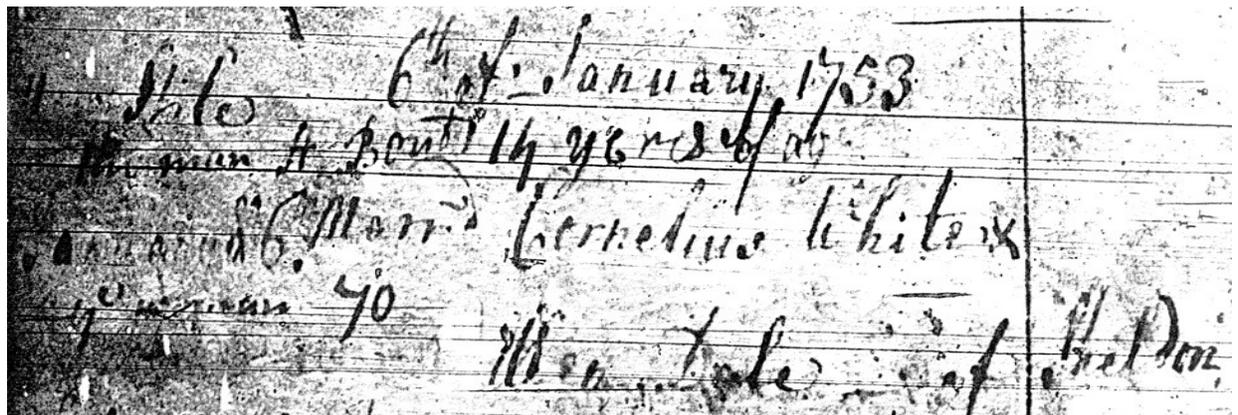
From the Mottram-in Longdendale, Cheshire parish register in 1780, we find this “peculiar marriage” (to quote the clerk):²



Behold! A peculiar Marriage! Daniel Broadbent
aged twenty three, - Martha Cheetham aged eighty three

Daniel Broadbent, the groom, was aged 23 and Martha Cheetham, the bride, aged 83. I like to say that true love knows no bounds.

Martha wasn't the only one to marry young. Perhaps even more spectacular is this marriage record in the Chapelry of Sheldon, Derbyshire register on January 6, 1753:³



Dale 6th of January 1753
The man A bout 14 years of age
and 6. Mrs. Cornelius White
a woman 70

Cornelius White married Ellen Dale of Sheldon. The note in the left margin reads “The man [about] 14 years of ag[e] the woman 70”. A newspaper account taken from the *Derby Mercury* relates the story including that the marriage was performed with the consent of his parents, she was carried to the church because she couldn't walk and in the after wedding party, she “commanded” her new husband to dance. The news report concludes with the following sentence:

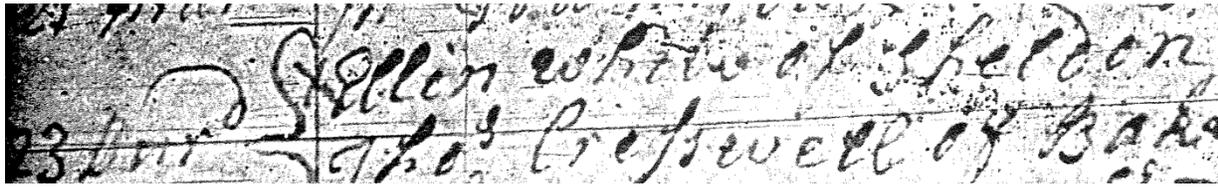
“The new-married couple, to consummate their marriage, were at length put to bed, to the side of which that well-polished and civilized company were admitted; the stocking was thrown, the posset drank, and the whole concluded with all the decorum, decency and order imaginable”⁴

² Church of England. *Parish Church of Mottram-in-Longdendale (Cheshire) Marriages 1754-1837*. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1966). FHL Film# 424861.

³ Church of England. *Chapelry of Sheldon (Derbyshire) Parish registers, 1745-1884*. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1981). FHL Film# 1041705 Items 16-21.

⁴ Thiselton-Dyer, T.F. *Old English social life as told by the parish registers*. (New York, New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1972). FHL# 942 H6th pages 144-5.

Sadly, poor Cornelius lost his bride 17 days later, on January 23rd (as recorded in the Bakewell, Derbyshire parish register).⁵



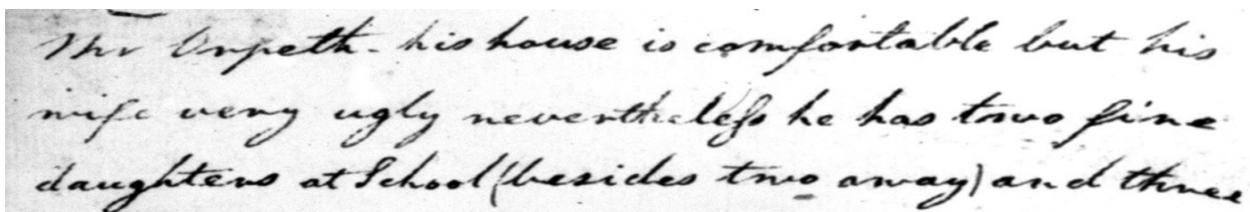
Again, the *Derby Mercury* wrote about the remarkable event saying “We are informed that last Sunday died at Sheldon, near Bakewell, the old gentlewoman who was married the 6th instant to a young lad, aged about 14. Her corpse was brought to Bakewell Church on Tuesday last, where she was handsomely interred . . .”⁶

Elizabeth Morris of Nash in Whaddon, Buckinghamshire probably never knew that the clerk added information when the christening of her son Matthew was recorded May 26th, 1776. Not only was her son “base born”, meaning illegitimate, but Elizabeth was described as “an ugly woman past 40”.⁷



“Ugly” actually had more than one definition. It was apparently a slang term for a woman of the evening. So who knows whether she was actually ugly?

It appears Robert Wintrip of Rothbury, Northumberland was not very fortunate. In an enumeration unofficially known as the “Rothbury Census of 1816”, likely by the rector Levison Venables Vernon, Mr. Wintrip’s household was described as “comfortable but his wife very ugly nevertheless he has two fine daughters at school . . .”⁸



⁵ Church of England. *Parish Church of Bakewell (Derbyshire) Burials, 1616-1803*. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1981-1997). FHL Film# 1041679.

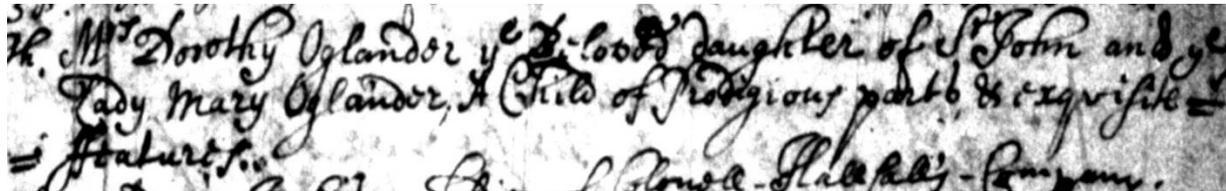
⁶ Thiselton-Dyer, T.F. *Old English social life as told by the parish registers*. (New York, New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1972). FHL# 942 H6th page 145.

⁷ Church of England. *Parish Church of Whaddon (Buckinghamshire), Baptisms, 1584-1643, 1672-1785*. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1982). FHL Film# 1042444 Items 11 – 15.

⁸ Church of England. *Parish Church of Rothbury (Northumberland) Personal census taken in 1816*. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1986). FHL Film# 1068680 Item 6.

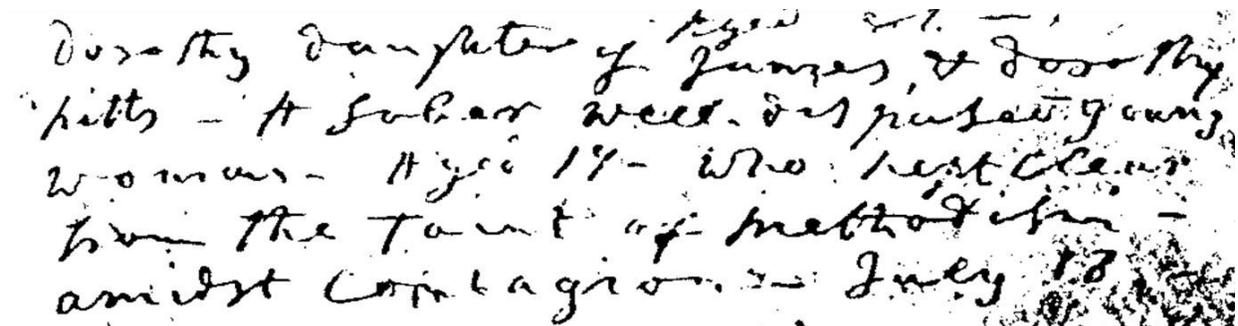
In spite of his ugly wife, he was at least consoled with two “fine” daughters.

Apparently, Mrs. Dorothy Oglander didn’t have that problem. In the Brading, Hampshire burial register on August 26th, 1676, the clerk added to her burial entry that she was “a child of prodigious parts and exquisite features”.⁹



One can’t help but wonder what the clerk was doing even noticing her prodigious parts.

Maybe it would be best if we could be more like Dorothy buried at Hempnall, Norfolk on July 18th, 1770. This daughter of James and Dorothy Pitts was “a sober well-disposed young woman, age 17, who kept clear from the taint of Methodism amidst contagion”.¹⁰



Not only is it fascinating that the clerk described Methodism as though it were some type of contagious virus but, considering the young age of Dorothy, it seems very possible that an actual, real contagious virus caused her early demise.

It’s unlikely that any of those who wrote the above in their parish registers expected that genealogists would come along hundreds of years later and scrutinize what they wrote. It does make you wonder what the clerks of our time and place could write about us.

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⁹ Church of England. *Parish Church of Brading (Hampshire) Burials 1547-1812*. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1987). FHL Film# 1278928 Items 29-37.

¹⁰ Church of England. *Parish Church of Hempnall Baptisms and burials 1745-1797*. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1990). FHL Film# 1565303 Item 1.