

Story of a House (part 1)

Many of us, when moving into a house where people have lived before, at some point probably daydream about the lives there of our predecessors. The older the house, the more pervasive the sense of the past: celebrations, sadness, lives begun and lives ended.

We have lived in our house on Eastfield Lane for more than 20 years and so have built up a fair few memories of our own. Throughout that time, though, it has been on my list



to do a bit of research into its history. Somehow, it has never happened until recently, when a chance event put wheels in motion.

We believed the house was probably built in the early part of the nineteenth century, although part of it could be older. We did have two pretty strong clues as to its origins as, in what seems a fairly common bit of local egotism, it bears two initials, WM, on all three of its gables and the road opposite is called Musgraves Orchard, though it really should have that missing apostrophe somewhere. So, William Musgrave seems to have been our man.

We have mentioned this to friends over the years (usually followed by ‘..and we really must find out more’) but recently one of them said; ‘Oh, by the way, I noticed there was an Ellen, daughter of William and Martha Musgrave, buried in Walesby churchyard. Do you think it’s the same one?’ Given that it’s not that far away, it seemed like a possibility and at this point we happened to mention it to our neighbour, Dawn Bowskill. Dawn is a volunteer historical researcher for the National Trust at Belton House so, interest piqued, she went into action on our behalf.

The work is still going on to make all the connections but Dawn has already unearthed the following tale of Victorian Welton, worthy of a Wilkie Collins novel, complete with family drama, a doughty police officer and a missing finger. And we think it all happened in our house.

The builder of our house, in the 1830s, was probably William Musgrave (1801-1862), a wealthy, respectable local farmer. It’s not a grand house but tall and elegantly proportioned, with a central staircase winding through its three storeys. Built of stone, with pantiled roof, it is the epitome of the local vernacular architecture and there are plenty of similar examples.

The 1841 census shows a William Musgrave married to Ann with just one child, a son born in 1824, perhaps unsurprisingly called William. William junior appears to have been a wayward young man. At some point he was fined for destroying a tent in which divine worship was being held and he was notorious locally for being ‘a desperate daredevil character, and continually drinking, fighting or wrestling’. However, this paled into insignificance beside the events of Sunday,

2nd August, 1852, as relayed in the *Lincolnshire Chronicle*. On this day, young William, in drink, became violent to the extent that his father barred him from the house and called for a constable. This did nothing to calm the situation and Mr Musgrave gave the constable a horse to fetch the Constable Superintendent, Mr Stephen Hardcastle, from his base on Newport in Lincoln. On his arrival in Welton Mr Hardcastle found the situation had worsened. William had broken into the house, smashed virtually all the windows, found some gin and his shotgun. Mr Hardcastle, perhaps unsurprisingly, found it difficult to enlist a volunteer to assist in an arrest but he met up with the constable for Dunholme, Mr Dobbikin, and he and the two constables proceeded to the Musgrave house. They met William outside but he threatened 'I will shoot the first b_ who comes near me', ran into the house and up the back stairs. Hardcastle followed and, as he climbed the stairs, William fired the shotgun. Hardcastle had just enough time to raise his arm in defence. Although injured by the blast, his momentum carried him on and he was able to grab William by the collar and throw him onto the bed before he was joined by the other constables, who helped him to place William in handcuffs. Hardcastle was by this time bleeding profusely and noticed that the middle finger on his left hand had been blown off.

Mr Hardcastle was taken to hospital in Lincoln, where he remained for a month. It was suggested that at some point during the incident two friends of William had coaxed him into removing the full charge from the shotgun and that the reduced charge was one reason for Hardcastle's relatively less serious injuries.

William Musgrave came to trial at Lincoln in March 1853 and was found guilty of shooting at Mr Hardcastle with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. The judge stated that he was sorry to see the only son of a respectable farmer commit a crime of such a magnitude, for which there was no mitigation, not least as it was committed upon an officer of the law. The judge commented that there were insufficient police officers in the county and awarded Superintendent Constable Hardcastle £5 for his bravery. He sentenced William to transportation for 14 years.

William was one of 225 prisoners who eventually set sail on 2nd February 1855 aboard the *Stag*, a 678 ton convict barque under Captain Clarke, bound for the Swan River penal colony in western Australia. William was listed as being one of the tallest of the prisoners at 5'10", probably an indication of his privileged upbringing. The voyage took 107 days and the prisoners disembarked at Fremantle, where they were transferred to the prison, newly- constructed by prisoners.

The Swan River Colony, now the city of Perth, dated from 1829 but had had difficulty retaining sufficient labour, mainly due to the fierce climate. At the colony's request, in 1849, the British government passed orders in council, determining that '*upon and from the first day of June in this present year; Her Majesty's settlements in Western Australia shall be places to which felons and other offenders in the United Kingdom then being or thereafter to be under sentence or order of transportation or banishments shall be conveyed...*'

The first convict ship arrived the following year and over the next 18 years some 9,700 British convicts were sent there.

William's term of transportation would have ended in 1867 but it seemed that he never made it that far. A note in the *Stamford Mercury* in August 1857 (the case was clearly still of some notoriety) stated that 'a letter from Western Australia' had disclosed the death of William Musgrave from 'pulmonary consumption'. Fremantle Prison closed several years ago and is now

a heritage centre. According to one of the curators there; 'The prison had a hospital that was built between 1857 and 1859, so William Musgrave was likely treated onsite by the establishment's doctor. The prison also has a morgue, but there were no burials on site. When a convict fell ill, they were treated at the prison hospital, and when they died they were transferred to the morgue, located in the cellar of the main cell block. Then, if the body was not claimed by family for private burial, they were taken to Fremantle cemetery and buried in a pauper's grave.'

Mysteriously, however, we have now found a record in the WA state records office that suggests that William actually married a young woman from Dublin in 1859. It was possible for prisoners to marry once they had acquired a Ticket of Leave (a kind of parole for good behaviour) and certainly there were plenty of people in the Swan River Colony of Irish descent. Perhaps William sent the message of his death himself to end all links with his family and Welton?

However, it is still possible that the life that started so promisingly in Welton ended anonymously and in disgrace on the other side of the world and that is what people in Welton were told. What would William senior have been thinking when he heard of the death of his only child? Would he have regretted calling for Mr Hardcastle on that fateful summer day?

By the late nineteenth century a new family seems to have entered the life of the house, the Stovins. As well as owning the house and farm, this local family were contractors for agricultural steam engines and had a yard, the buildings of which still exist, off Ryland Road. I would be very pleased to hear from any current member of the family or anyone who has any information about them.

Graham Nicholls