



History:	
Topic:	Caroline Gooch – A sad story.
Date of Record:	November 2021
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Notes:	The sad story of a Hargrave girl who became the victim of social stigma.

The Sad Case of Caroline Gooch (1845 – 1865)

Caroline Gooch was born in Hargrave in 1845 and was the daughter of George Gooch (1816) who married Sarah (Prigg) (1826) who came from Chedburgh in 1842. At the time of her death in 1865, Caroline had three brothers John (1843), Samson (1848) and Thomas (1859), along with two sisters, Harriet (1853) and Eliza (1856). Her father is listed in the 1851 and 1861 Censuses for Hargrave as an Agricultural Labourer living with his family on Hargrave Green and then in the Cottages, Hargrave, respectively.

Like many teenage girls at that time the opportunities for employment were limited. Whilst their male counterparts could find work on the land, Caroline's options would have been, to go in to service or to work as a tailoress for the burgeoning rural garment industry, either as a home worker or at the local factories at Chevington and Barrow. It is obvious from the following press article below that she ended up with the former career and at a location probably away from Hargrave where she was required to live in.

Ultimately whilst we do not have detail of where she was in service the fact remains that she became pregnant. Physical and sexual exploitation of young housemaids was not uncommon, and would usually result in their instant dismissal with no redress to the alleged father, especially if he was the employer or part of his family. There would also be the stigma of potentially having a child out of wedlock although again this was not an uncommon state of affairs in all social classes.

We are unable to truly appreciate what thoughts were running through Caroline's head. Whilst it appears that her parents welcomed her home, which was not always the case in such circumstances, they would not have been as appreciative of another potential mouth to feed.

There was another option of handing the baby to a foundling hospital, but to get their child accepted a written petition had to be submitted stating the case that they were of previous "good character", and that they had only once "fallen" into a "criminal conversation", as it was called. Often illiterate the mother may have to rely on someone else to write up her case, but she would still often have to personally present intimate evidence to a panel often made up solely of middle age men.

At least if she were successful it was a means of avoiding the spectre of the workhouse where infant mortality rates were high. However whilst their babies had a better chance of survival as a foundling, their mothers were actively discouraged from carrying on any form of relationship with their child going forward.

Unsurprisingly therefore, out of desperation many in Caroline's situation sought to bring on a miscarriage. Abortion itself became illegal in 1803, and the law was strengthened by the 1861 Offences Against The Persons Act. It is unlikely however, that anyone in Hargrave had access to an Abortionist,

but a nearby town may have been different. It was a risky profession and should a pregnant mother die as a result of the process the Abortionist would face the death penalty on conviction.

Far more common was the ingestion of drugs and chemicals, and it would appear from the evidence in this case that Caroline sought this route as a way out of her situation. She never admitted the act or indeed "the offence" as respectable opinion would have classed this act as the same as infanticide.

If she had confided that she had taken the "corrosive sublimate" whether or not this would have made any difference to her medical treatment is unlikely. Sadly the option she chose was ultimately to prove her downfall, the strain of childbirth proving too much for her weakened body.

Times have radically changed since the 1860's, and although still potentially a politically and religiously divisive topic, at least in this country women can make their own choices knowing they have greatly improved medical and mental support networks in place to help them.

The following article was printed in the Suffolk and Essex Free Press 12th October 1865.

HARGRAVE

ACCIDENTALLY POISONED. – A sad case of death from poison has just occurred at this place, a poor servant girl being the victim. The inquest was held on Saturday before G. A. Partridge Esq., at The Bull Inn, Hargrave, on the body of Caroline Gooch, aged 20 years, who died under the following circumstances :-

It appeared that the deceased, who was the daughter of a labourer in the parish, came home from service last Whitsuntide, and her mother soon found out she was in the family way. About a month ago she suffered from sore throat, sickness, and want of appetite, and on Monday, the 18th of September, she was so much worse that Mrs Gooch sent for Mr W. S. Barker, surgeon, who suspected from her symptoms that she had taken poison, and asked her if such was the case, but she neither admitted or denied it.

Mrs Gooch produced a bottle labelled "Poison" containing something that was being used by one of the deceased's brothers for disease in the foot, and on Mr Barker's tasting it he found that it contained corrosive sublimate; it had been supplied by a medical man.

Deceased continued to suffer more or less, but got better and came downstairs. On Thursday, the 5th inst., she was prematurely delivered of a six months' child, which only lived a few hours. She was attended by a midwife, but everything went on right until the evening, when Mr Barker found her sinking, and she died the same night from exhaustion, consequence of her premature confinement, which he said, brought on by debilitated state, arising from the effects of the poison.

Mr Barker afterwards made a post mortem examination, and found congestion of the gullet, inflammation of the oesophagus, and inflammation of the stomach: he had no doubt that she had taken some of the corrosive sublimate, for she had all the symptoms of it. If it had not been from her premature confinement he thought she would have recovered from the effects of the poison.

Mrs Gooch said that she first saw the bottle on the day before Mr Barker came, and was quite ignorant of her daughter having taken any of its contents: it came to her house on that day. Mrs Gooch stated that during her daughter's illness she frequently asked her if she took any out of the bottle, but she only shook her head and did not speak.

Sophia Sergeant, who sat up with the deceased, also stated that she asked similar questions, but she never replied by word or look, although she begged deceased to tell her father or mother.

- Verdict, *“that deceased died from exhaustion after premature confinement brought on by taking poison”*

NB Further information on domestic service as it relates to Hargrave residents in the 19th century, can be found in the article ‘Hargrave Women in Domestic Service’ in the History section of this website.

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