



History:

Topic:	A Fowl Affair - 1889
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Author:	Nicholas Newman
Notes:	Background to poultry husbandry and theft in Victorian England, with examples from Hargrave.

A Fowl Affair – 1889

Introduction

A recurring theme in rural Britain throughout the 19th century was the theft of livestock from farmers and individuals. Cases were brought to court covering horse stealing to rabbit theft, and of course lamb or sheep stealing was a capital crime from 1741 to 1832, although the majority of those convicted of such offences were instead transported to the colonies until that practice ceased in 1868.

Similarly the theft of poultry including chickens, ducks, turkeys, pheasants and partridges etc. was one of the commonest petty crimes. The act was often motivated by hunger amongst the destitute or for the more unscrupulous, they saw it as an opportunity to make money by selling on at the local ale house or to the local butcher. Magistrates could hand out harsh punishments to such individuals, including hard labour or longer custodial sentences for repeat offenders. This reflected the commonly held view that the theft of poultry directly affected the livelihood of some of the poorest members of the community. However Magistrates could also be more lenient to those in genuine poverty especially during harsh winter weather.

Chicken theft usually occurred under the cover of darkness, with birds normally inactive or asleep in their coops until sunrise. Birds could be calmed with alcohol laced breadcrumbs or more often their necks were rung to avoid squawking and the alarm being raised. Tracing the culprits was not easy unless the hens were marked in some way, but prosecutions were successfully taken where the local constabulary followed trails of feathers or footprints in mud leading directly to the perpetrators home.



This article covers a typical example of chicken theft heard before Magistrates in November 1889 where local labourer George Baker from Depden is found guilty of chicken stealing from Eliza Smart the wife of the then landlord of the Cocks Head Inn, Hargrave on Monday 31st of October. The prosecution case was convincing, with witnesses stating George had been in the inn from nine o'clock in the morning to three o'clock in the afternoon, and then on leaving he made off with a birds valued at 1s. 6d. each. When he arrived home he was caught with blood on his face, hands gloves and coat, and the dead birds recovered by the police were identified by Mrs Smart as being hers. On this occasion Baker was treated leniently and ordered to pay a fine of £1, which he did.

The following report was printed in The Bury and Norwich Post and Suffolk Standard on the 5th November 1889.

THINGOE & THEDWASTRE PETTY SESSIONS, Bury, Wednesday, October 30th.

(Before the Rev. T. J. Steele (in the chair), and the Rev. Canon Turner.)

FOWL STEALING AT HARGRAVE

— George Baker, Depden, labourer, was charged with stealing a fowl valued at 1s. 6d. at Hargrave, on the 28th inst.

— Mr. C E. Salmon appeared for the defendant, who was quite deaf, and had to be accompanied by an interpreter.

— Eliza the wife of Robert Smart, deposed that her husband was landlord of the Hargrave Cock's Head. On Monday afternoon the defendant left her house shortly after three o'clock, and in consequence of what she was told she went to his house and waited outside for about an hour for him to come home. When he came she noticed that his face and clothes were bloody. She asked him how he accounted for that, and he replied that it was not blood, but black.

Witness accused him of killing her fowls, which he denied doing. Thereupon she took his coat away and examined it. Inside one of the pockets was a quantity of fresh blood, and some feathers, and a breakfast bag (which was perfectly clean when defendant was at witness's house), was covered with blood. This he said was caused by his wife having put raw meat into it for his breakfast

Such was not the case, however, and he had nothing but bread and cheese for his breakfast. Witness had since identified the fowls in possession of p.c. Brunning. She had not counted them from Saturday morning till Monday evening about nine o'clock, when there were seven short. (A fowl was here produced, which witness, identified as her property.). Witness should think the fowl was killed with a stick or stone, as its wing was broken.

— Mr. Salmon cross-examined witness as to the defendant's previous character, and elicited that during the six years she had known the defendant she had known little against his honesty but should not like to give him a character as an honest man.

— Frederick Sargeant, labourer, lodging at the Cock's Head, Hargrave, deposed to hearing some chickens making a noise in the road outside the house, about three o'clock in the afternoon of Monday. He went in that direction, and saw a man in Mr. Farrow's field, trying to run a fowl down. They were Mrs. Smart's fowls. As soon as the man saw witness he ran away. Witness followed him down the field, along the road, and up by the side of Easty Wood. As defendant went round a little bend in the wood, witness could see his face. He was then about 60 yards in front of witness. Defendant turned round and looked, and then went into the wood.

— Ernest Farrow said that his father was tenant of Easty Wood. On Tuesday he went in search of a fowl in the wood, and along the side of a private path found the fowl now produced, about five yards into the "slop." It was about 100 yards from where Sargeant saw the man turn into the wood.

— Ernest Pettitt, farmer living, at Hargrave, spoke to being present when Mrs. Smart searched defendant's pockets. In addition to the bag, he also mentioned that a pair of gloves were covered with blood, and there was blood on defendant's face and hands, and his trousers were wet as though he had just passed through the wood.

— The defendant elected to have the case dealt with summarily.

— Mr. Salmon said that after the evidence (which had been produced, which was quite different from what his instructions were, or he should not have appeared there that day), he felt they must plead guilty to the charge, but he asked the Bench to impose a fine.

— *The Bench said they considered it very serious charge, and imposed a fine of £1.— Paid.*

Background to the Protagonists

George Baker

George Edward Baker was one of at least eight children born to John Baker (1814 -c.1886) and wife Martha Simpken (1815 -1903) who were born and lived local to The Green, Depden. They are recorded in the national censuses, with John listed as an Agricultural Labourer and a Pauper in 1851. Apart from their financial difficulties, the family had also suffered the trauma of George's grandfather Thomas Baker (1784 – 1842) committing suicide.

John and Martha's children were Thomas (1836 -1881), Sarah Loretta (1838), Henry (1839), Elias (1841 - 1917), George Edward (1844 -1906), Susan (1847), Mary (1848) and John Leonard (1852) and Frederick William (1863).

George junior was born profoundly deaf, meaning he had a complete loss of hearing and could not understand conversational speech, relying more on visual communication. The education system would have been a challenge, both with his family background and disability. Some may have ignored him or seen him as a societal burden and thus persecuted him. However he seems to have successfully integrated gaining employment with his brothers as a labourer with a local farm contractor.

He also overcame likely social stigma, when he met and married Caroline Emily Smith (1854) from Wickhambrook in 1876 at Depden, St Mary the Virgin in 1876, and the couple also lived by The Green in Depden, although they are not recorded as having any children.

Prior to the court case of 1889, George Baker also appeared in court on a few other occasions as reproduced in the press reports transcribed later in this article. Unfortunately they do not reflect very favourably on his general character. In 1863 he is convicted of an assault on a young girl resulting in three months hard labour, which would probably be seen as lenient by today's standards. Then there is also a theft case 1880 which he is effectively acquitted.

Through these cases we can also learn more about George's working life as he receives a positive reference from his employer John Sangster. Further detail on the Sangster family can be found at the end of this article.

Robert and Eliza Smart

Robert Smart was born in Conington, Cambridgeshire, and was one of 12 children of Richard Smart (1810 – 1891), a gardener and wife Ann Aubrey (1814 – 1895). Their children were Ann (1835), Thomas (1836), Martha (1838), John (1840), Elizabeth (1842), Richard (1843), William (1846), Rhoda French (1847 - 1868), Reuben (1850), Robert (1851 – 1922), Sarah French (1863 - 1907), Joseph (1856), and James Payne (1858 - 1913).

Robert married Eliza Sarah Challis (1855 -1911) from Ousden in 1882. He had initially worked as a gardener like his father, at Huntingden in the 1870's before a change in career becoming the landlord of the Cocks Head Inn at Knowles Green in the 1880's. The couple were to have five children: Percy (1885 - 1943), Bertie (1886 - 1893), Herbert George (1888 – 1977), Harold Richard (1890 – 1973), and William Harry Challis (1891 - 1974).

By 1892 John Kerry had taken over as landlord at the Cocks Head Inn and Robert had reverted to employment as a jobbing gardener, continuing to live at Knowles Green, until his death.

Wife Eliza was the daughter of George Challis (1827 – 1910) an Agricultural Labourer from Ousden, who had married Sarah Crack (1836 -1915) from Ixworth. Eliza was their eldest child; her siblings being: Susan (1856), Elizabeth Ann (1858 – 1942), John (1861 – 1918), Frederick (1865), Anna (1868 – 1954), Kate Jane (1871 – 1948), and Henry George (1874).

Detailed reports found in the local press relating to further court appearances by George Baker and family.

The following item was printed in the Bury and Norfolk Herald on the 15th June 1842.

Inquisitions before Harry Wayman Esq., Coroner – On the 31st ult. At Depden on the body of Thomas Baker. The deceased was nearly 60 years of age, and hung himself whilst labouring under a fit of temporary insanity. Verdict accordingly.

The following item was printed in the Bury and Norwich Post on the 27th October 1863.

WICKHAMBROOK.

PETTY SESSIONS, Oct. 22nd.

Magistrates present The Revds. M. J. Lloyd and T.J. Steele and N. W. Bromley, Esq.

*GROSS OUTRAGE - George Baker, of Depden, was charged with an aggravated and indecent assault on a little girl eight years of age, named Jane Goddard, of Chedburgh, on the 27th Sept. The little girl deposed that she went to Depden across the fields on the previous Sunday, and that on coming back she met the prisoner, *** ***** ***, and committed the assault complained of.*

Her statement was corroborated by another little girl, named Harriet Pask, who was with her, and Mrs. Goddard, mother of the complainant, deposed that when she came home she appeared very much frightened, and her clothes were very dirty

—P.c. Burningham deposed: On receiving information of the assault took the little girl to identify the prisoner, and she pointed Baker out as the man who had assaulted her. Mr. Baldwin told me he heard a child screaming in the direction of the field, but could not say whose child it was. Baker was also seen to come from the same direction a short time after.

—Mr. Lloyd said no punishment was too severe for such disgraceful conduct, and sentenced the prisoner to three months' hard labour.

The following item was printed in the Bury and Suffolk Standard on the 9th November 1880.

BURY DIVISION, Nov. 3.

Magistrates present: J. South Phillips. Esq., in the chair; A. J. Young, Esq., and the Revds. T. J. Steele and G. F. Turner.

A SUSPICIOUS CASE —George Baker, of Depden, who, it was stated, is in the employ of Mr. J. Sangster, of Chevington Greyhound, was brought up in custody, charged with stealing an overcoat, valued at 15s., the property of Mr. Manning, landlord of the Marquis of Cornwallis, Chedburgh, on the 9th alt.

—Defendant is very deaf, and some difficulty was experienced in proceeding with the case. His mother was, however, called into the Courtroom with a view of facilitating the enquiry.

—Defendant, in answer to the Magistrates' Clerk, said he wished the case summarily disposed of, and made a statement to the effect that the coat was put upon his arm by some person as he was on his way home, but he did not know who.

—It was stated some bills, bearing the name of the owner had been left in the coat, but these had been taken out and burnt.

—Police-constable Baker, stationed at Chedburgh, the officer who took defendant into custody, stated that he was a good scholar, and a very intelligent man.

—Mr. Sangster stated that defendant was employed by him, and worked at an engine, feeding the drum. He was surprised to find defendant charged with the theft which, he should have thought, would have been the last thing to happen, defendant having always been to the best of his (Mr. Sangster's) knowledge very honest.

—Mr. Manning said when he came home he laid his rug and whip beside the coat.

—Defendant made a statement, according to which it seemed there was a row on the road upon the night in question, and someone began to strip and go fighting, when the coat was given to him by a person whom he did not know. He did not steal it, but took it home till he found out the owner.

—Mr. Sangster remarked that the defendant was taken in custody, and away from his work without any notice being given, so that he might have the opportunity of getting another man to take his place without loss of time.

—In reply to the Bench, it was stated defendant did not appear to have used the coat.

—Complainant said his own name was upon bills, which were in one of the pockets, but they were gone.

— Mr. Young: They might have slipped out.

—Complainant thought that unlikely, as they had been placed in the inside pocket

—Mr. Sangster: You did not see defendant take the coat?

—Mr. Meaning: No, or I should have stopped him there and then.

—Mr. Sangster said defendant had hitherto been a good character, having been in his employ four years. He had made enquiries respecting him of another person who had known him longer, and had found he would not take even a turnip without leave.

—Mr. Young suggested that the defendant had been the victim of a practical joke.

—The Rev. G. F. Turner thought the defendant had not given a satisfactory explanation and it was remarked that the defendant knew all those who were in his company that evening.

—Police constable Baker said defendant's wife had told him that he put the bills from the coat into the fire, but, it was stated, she had since denied saying so, and the constable remarked he thought she was not exactly responsible for her actions, as she had been to an asylum once.

—*Mr. Young remarked that he was for dismissing the case.*

—*The Rev. T. J. Steele: So am I.*

—*Mr. Young: No jury would convict him.*

—*Police constable Baker said defendant's wife would not give up the coat until he threatened to search the house.*

—*The Magistrates retired to consult, and after a short deliberation, this course was adopted, and the coat was ordered to be given up to the owner.*

The following item was printed in the Bury Free Press on the 29th May 1886.

BY ORDER OF THE MORTGAGEE

THURSDAY NEXT. DEPDEN GREEN,

H. LACY SCOTT

Has received instructions to Sell by Auction, at the Marquis Cornwallis Inn, Chedburgh, on THURSDAY, June 3rd, 1886, at Five o'clock.

LOT 1. —FIVE COTTAGES with Gardens and Outbuildings, pleasantly situate Depden Green, in the occupation of George Baker and others Tenure-Freehold.

Lot 2—A MESSUAGE with Orchard and One Acre of Arable Land, situate on Depden Green, late in the occupation of Mr. Shave. Tenure—Copyhold of the Manor of Depden.

ALSO TWO COMMON RIGHTS.

Further particulars future papers, of Messrs Sparke and Sons, Solicitors, and of H. Lacy Scott, Land Agent and Auctioneer, Bury St. Edmund's.

Footnote A:

Brief History of Poultry Husbandry

Many believe the domestication of fowl began over 4,000 years ago in Southeast Asia, with jungle birds utilised for eggs and meat and their feathers used as components for arrows and for personal adornment. There is evidence they were farmed by the Greeks and Egyptians as a supplementary source of protein, whereas the Romans actively fattened chickens with grain, so they could be used as a main component in numerous recipes . The more widespread consumption of chicken in Europe at the beginning of the 11th century is thought to have been driven by the popularity of cock fighting, a practice that was eventually outlawed in Great Britain in 1835.



US intensive farming methods in the 1920's and selective breeding in the 1950's developed the chickens we recognise today with "laying hens" for egg production and "broilers" for cheap meat. Poultry has now become a staple of diets across the world, exceeding beef and challenging pork consumption.

Poultry husbandry was at its most popular in the mid 19th century and was a time of "Hen Fever", driven by devotees such as Queen Victoria at Winsor, and the elite and the middle classes keeping highly valued exotic imported breeds.

For the working class they kept more established basic "barn-door" birds for more practical reasons. In urban areas these more basic breeds were kept in small coops in the back yards of terraced houses, whilst in rural settings, they had more freedom to roam but, still needed well-ventilated waterproof shelters especially in the winter. Feeding usually consisted of kitchen scraps and homemade mashes, producing eggs and the occasional protein supplement for the family when egg laying declined after about three years. Whilst poultry could be extremely sociable with humans, ultimately for most, they had to earn their keep. Commonly the birds would be cared for by the mother or eldest daughter of the family, and any egg surpluses sold off by them.

Footnote B:

The Sangster Family in Chevington.

George Baker's was employed by John Sangster, where his job was to feed a threshing drum, The drum was a key mechanical element of a threshing machine and was designed to violently beat and separate edible wheat and barley grains from surrounding husks and straw. A full set of equipment including elevator would be hired out to farmers in the local area.

Originally from Cavenham, John and his wife Elizabeth May Norman (1837 - 1885), moved to Chevington to take over the licence to run The Greyhound Inn from James Robert Ransom in the spring of 1873. They were to run the inn and their agricultural business from Moores Farm, Chevington. Following John's death his wife Elizabeth is recorded as landlady in 1887.

Their eldest son John (1868 – 1928) was then to take over running the hire business again based at Moores Farm, along with wife Alice Maud Mary Mudd (1871), who he married in 1894. She was the daughter of William Y Mudd a Chedburgh farmer. The next eldest son Daniel William (1869 – 1899) then became The Greyhound landlord in the 1890's until his death, when wife Mary Cooper (1869 - 1953) took over and ran the inn for the next 20+ years. Her father was John Cooper listed as Chevington Post Master on their wedding certificate in 1891.

Running a threshing drum and elevator service appears to have significant fire risks as outlined in the press report reproduced below. The Sangster family also lost their equipment at a major fire at

Whepstead in 1899, and there are several other instances concerning other contractors. The cause was usually sparks from the steam engines or poorly lubricated machinery causing friction and setting fire to highly combustible crop dust.

The following item was printed in the Suffolk Mercury on the 25th March 1898.

STACK ON FIRE NEAR BURY.

THRASHING-DRUM AND ELEVATOR DESTROYED

On Tuesday afternoon, about four o'clock, a disastrous fire broke out on a farm in the occupation of Mr. William Mudd, of Depden, just beyond the boundary of Chedburgh. Thrashing operations were proceeding, when a stack of wheat, the produce of about 13 acres, was observed to be on fire, and soon another stack of barley straw became ignited, and was destroyed, as were also the drum and elevator.

Under the direction of Captain H. W. Tracy, Sub-Captain C. F. Felton, and Lieutenant H. O. C. Walpole, some members of the Bury St. Edmund's Fire Brigade quickly went to the scene of the conflagration. Supt. Clarke was also promptly upon the spot.

The stacks belonging to Mr. W. Mudd were insured in the Alliance Office. The thrashing machine drum and elevator, the property of Mr. J. Sangster, of Chevington, were insured in the London and Liverpool Fire Office.



Edmond Charles Yon – The Threshing Machine

Nicholas Newman – June 2026