

## THE MAN WHO SOLD HIS WIFE FOR A SHILLING

Blythburgh's magnificent medieval church commands river and marsh from a site associated with Christianity for over one thousand three hundred years. But how many of the stream of visitors attracted to the church every year realise that just to one side of the path they take from car park to south door, is the last resting place of George Whincop, village blacksmith, and witness to a most curious event that took place in Blythburgh on Thursday the 29th of October 1789. On that day Samuel Balls sold his wife for a shilling.

Two days later, with a speed suggesting premeditation, Samuel Balls inserted an advertisement in the county newspaper, the *Ipswich Journal*, which carried the following notice: 'Oct 29 SAMUEL Balls sold his wife to ABRAHAM RADE in the parish of Blythburgh in this county for 1s. A halter was put round her, and she was resigned up to this Abraham Rade. No person or persons to intrust her with my name, Samuel Balls, for she is no longer my right.' Then followed the names of four witnesses: M. Bullock, the village constable, Samuel Balls himself, George Whincop, and Robert Sherington, landlord of the *White Hart*. Perhaps it was in the yard of the inn that the participants gathered, some serious, some approving, others disapproving, some just curious, with no doubt many well-fuelled by the local ale, still downed by appreciative customers today. The inn is a more likely venue than the village market place, already redundant for longer than even the oldest inhabitant could possibly remember, and on the other side of the new turnpike that had sliced through the middle of Blythburgh a few years before.

How should we view Samuel Balls' action, or indeed that of the purchaser, Abraham Rade? And what of the unfortunate woman, apparently humiliated by being taken to the point of sale secured by a halter and not even granted a name in the written record. Sir John Cullum, of Hardwick House near Bury St Edmunds, was in no doubt. He spotted the piece in his newspaper, cut it out, and stuck it in his scrapbook, adding the words: 'In this enlightened age, one would hardly think of seeing such an advertisement as the above'. But should he have been surprised? Was the ceremony all that unusual, and is shock an appropriate reaction even for us today?

Blythburgh's parish registers might tell us a little more about the people involved. There are references to the Balls family as far back as 1587 but the crucial entry is that for the 6th of August 1782 when Samuel Balls of Holton married Mary Bedingfield of Blythburgh. A cautious historian would add that this might not be the same Samuel for their daughter Elizabeth was baptised on the 11th of April 1790 - after the sale - although perhaps there could be an error in the register transcription. But there is also an entry for the death of Mary Balls, a married woman, in December 1799. If these are the same individuals, Samuel Balls sold a pregnant wife and they were reconciled soon afterwards. But such temptations to embroider the story must be resisted.

Most people will have encountered the practice of wife-selling, if at all, through Thomas Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge*, published in 1886. The future mayor, Michael Henchard, as a young man in a drunken gesture, sells his wife and child at a village fair, to a complete stranger. Samuel Balls' receipt of one shilling pales into insignificance compared with the five guineas paid to Henchard. These aspects of Hardy's version, together with its casual brutality and lack of

ritual, make it a misleading stereotype. Wife selling was not only quite common, it had a specific social purpose, and the way it was done – the ritual – was very important. It was, in fact, a form of divorce and through ritual the participants sought to make it lawful. Far from being 'unfortunate' the wife could have been a willing party to the arrangement.

In 1789 civil divorce was all but impossible. The church would annul a marriage under certain circumstances – if a husband was impotent over a three-year period, for example, or, if a spouse disappeared and was not heard of for seven years, they could be presumed dead. The limited grounds could be extended by the passing of a private Act of Parliament, but this was a route open only to the rich and influential. Many ordinary couples, whose marriages had broken down, resorted to the 'wife sale' as a means to give not only their break but also the forming of a new relationship, some legal credibility. Over four hundred examples are known, stretching into the twentieth century. So the sale of Samuel's wife was a set up, and Abraham Rade was ready and waiting as the purchaser. His relationship with Mrs Balls could already have been established. They used the symbolism of the legal contract best known to them, that of the market place. There had to be an auctioneer, money had to change hands (the shilling was a token sum – it was barely the daily wage of a labourer), there had to be a formal announcement, and, perhaps worst of all in our eyes, a halter had to be used. But we must not assume that the women were being represented as chattels. Nor were they necessarily the victims in the process. They knew their value and their rights, and acknowledged the need to observe a ritual to give the event a lawful appearance. Their consent was generally a condition of the sale.

We do not know why Samuel and his wife split up. If it is the same Samuel in the parish register, an eighteenth-century 'seven-year-itch' could have been at work. Let us hope that he was more gallant than another seller, at Bungay fair in the late nineteenth century, who stated: 'Well, that's like this, Sir, when I married her she was straight as a lath, could get my arm round her nice little waist and give her a kiss, and thought she was an angel. Now, dang me, I can't get near her by a yard!' And what of George Whincop, the silent witness. He was 80 when he died in 1847 and had been, as his headstone tells us, 'upwards of 50 years blacksmith of this parish'. Did he always remember that day in 1789 when, in his early twenties, he witnessed the sale of a wife? Was it a tale retold many times in the bar of the *White Hart*, as it could still be today?

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