

Almsman Henry Mayne Tidmarsh RN Ewelme News, Oct-Nov 2014

Unexpected information about an Almshouse character came from Melbourne, Australia, in the shape of an old newspaper cutting from the 'Akaroa Mail' dated 13th April 1877. This is an obituary to Henry Mayne Tidmarsh— "*On the 22nd March, 1876 at Ewelme, Oxfordshire, England, H M Tidmarsh aged 89 ½ years. One of the gallant crew of the HMS "Shannon" during her memorable engagement with the USS "Chesapeake", and a relative of Mr T Warner, Wainui.*" This brief but fierce naval battle took place off Boston Harbour in 1813 during the 1812-1815 war with America.



HMS Shannon taking USS Chesapeake in 1813.

A Ewelme Archive document written by a Victorian visitor, revealed that Henry M Tidmarsh had also served at the Battle of the Nile (Aboukir) in August 1798 when he was still 11 years old. (This was not unusual, as the ships complement of HMS Shannon included 24 boys, 13 of whom were under 12 years of age!) Henry left the Navy after the victorious HMS Shannon returned to Portsmouth. In June 1814 he married Elizabeth Russell in Ewelme, and became a 'labourer'. As an aged almsman he kept a hive of bees and "*would sit watching them for hours.*" And the belated yet newsworthy connection to the 'old country'? Henry's son John Tidmarsh (1815-1887) married Sarah, Thomas Warner's sister. (It is unlikely that three of Henry's four daughters paid a similar public tribute to their heroic father. They lived in Illinois!)

At the Cloisters Messrs George D Leslie unearthed a remarkable character in the shape of Almsman Tidmarsh.



The Cloisters Ewelme Almshouses

'The main attractions, however, to [his friend] Mr Marks and myself, were the old almshouses and their inhabitants, in many respects these are still more picturesque than those at Bray. The covered wooden cloisters at Ewelme, and the staircase which joins the building to the Church in which Chaucer's granddaughter, the foundress of the almshouses, lies buried, are quite unique in their way. The dwellers in this fine old refuge were also interesting; one was an old sailor named Tidmarsh, who had been as a boy in the Battle of the Nile, [1798] and afterwards in the action between the 'Shannon' and the 'Chesapeake' [1813]. He kept bees, and would sit watching them for hours. Marks made a little portrait of him in this occupation. Tidmarsh's bees swarmed whilst we were in Ewelme, and Marks and I witnessed the operation of hiving them. The old man followed the swarm about with a tin pot and stick to make 'the bee music' and when the queen at length settled on a gooseberry bush and had been entirely covered with her subjects, he held an empty hive under the bough and with his bare hand gently brushed the swarm into it. He then placed it on the ground and covered it with cabbage leaves. He said in reply to our questions, that the bees would not sting him, as they knew he gave them 'their vittles in the winter' but he advised us not to come too close.

The bee music is not altogether to please the bees, though it is mentioned as made for that purpose in Virgil. We were told that if a person's bees swarm and settle in a neighbour's garden, the bee master cannot claim his swarm unless he has shown his cognizance of the swarming by sounding the music, and in order to keep up the right of ownership the bees are often followed for a considerable distance by the bee master and his noise. Marks took great delight in these old people, and they were equally fond of him, as were also the village children, for whom we sometimes scrambled halfpennies in the brook, the children dashing recklessly into the water after them.'

Where now is the sketch of almsman Tidmarsh, the sea salt and bee watcher?

Ewelme Village Archive