

‘The sad case of the Tuckwell girl’

This enigmatic sentence was recorded in the diary on 24th February 1843 of Lady Charlotte Taunton who lived at Ewelme Huse (now Saffron House). Fortunately, the diary was taken to Auckland by her emigrating niece Blanche Lush and transcribed in the 1970’s. See essays on Blanche Hawkins Lush and their home, Ewelme Cottage in Parnell, Auckland, New Zealand which is now a museum, and a former Ewelme Cottage curator who kindly shared with us many documents relating to the history of the Lush family. The mystery remained on file as to why a society lady would record a ‘sad case’ of a humble village girl. The answer finally came from Bob Allan, a Tuckwell family researcher. Amy was born in 1823, one of 8 children of labourer David and Harriet Tuckwell and had gone away to work. She came home pregnant and very ill, and died 10 days later on February 19th, 1843, giving birth to a stillborn baby. An inquest was held the same day but adjourned by the Coroner for a postmortem by two local surgeons confirming Amy had recently given birth.

On 25th February the Oxford Chronicle & Reading Gazette gave a report on the second inquest. Incredibly, David and Harriet denied knowledge of Amy’s pregnancy. This aroused suspicion ‘*as it was conjectured the birth and concealment could not have taken place without their knowledge*’. Their house, ‘*and the immediate neighbourhood were strictly searched*’ and on February 20th, whilst Amy was being buried, ‘*the body of a female infant was found in a shrubbery, adjoining the residence of Mr Joseph Franklin, in whose employ the girl’s father is...*’ This was New House, now called The White House in Cat Lane. The Tuckwell’s were arrested as they left the churchyard!

At another inquest the parents were questioned separately. After prevaricating, Harriet finally confessed the delivery of a dead baby. She had concealed everything from her neighbours ‘*to avoid disgrace*’, nor had she sought medical aid, but had ‘*administered salts in copious doses*’ to Amy. Her husband resolutely persisted in denying all knowledge of the circumstances, ‘*and even behaved at times with great insolence*’ but finally ‘cracked’ when the infant’s body and his wife’s evidence were shown to him. He burst into tears. ‘*Well gentlemen, if I must confess, I must; I dug the hole, and my wife put the child into it.*’ As the postmortem proved the child was stillborn, they were dismissed with a severe reprimand from the Coroner. The two surgeons agreed that Amy’s death was caused by premature confinement and the gross neglect and injudicious treatment of her mother. Both Coroner and jury regretted they had no power to commit the Tuckwell’s, but they ‘*were determined to use every effort to bring them to punishment*’. Whether that happened or not, is another mystery.