

Were my ancestors Horlers or Horners?

By Mark Wareham

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Thankfully the days are long past when the local gentry in a rural village could run a parish in a completely feudal fashion. For a start rural communities are very different today with few working people relying on the direct employment and housing from families like the Horners of Mells as they did in generations before. As a result many of the things that used to happen in the 18th and 19th centuries in places like Mells do not generally happen today and individual rights and freedoms, even of working class people, are more respected than they used to be.

But it would be wrong to say that even today there is no such thing as a family disgrace or that things do not get covered up, regardless of the social status of the family concerned. But I do not think that anyone in my family would have got away with telling this story in days gone past, particularly before the First World War. But I feel able to reveal it now without fear of losing my job and my family home! Whether it is true or not I cannot say and there is no proof. But there is enough of a whiff of credibility, enough of a possibility and the existence of family rumour for it to be told.

Was one of these two Horners my great x 3 grandfather?



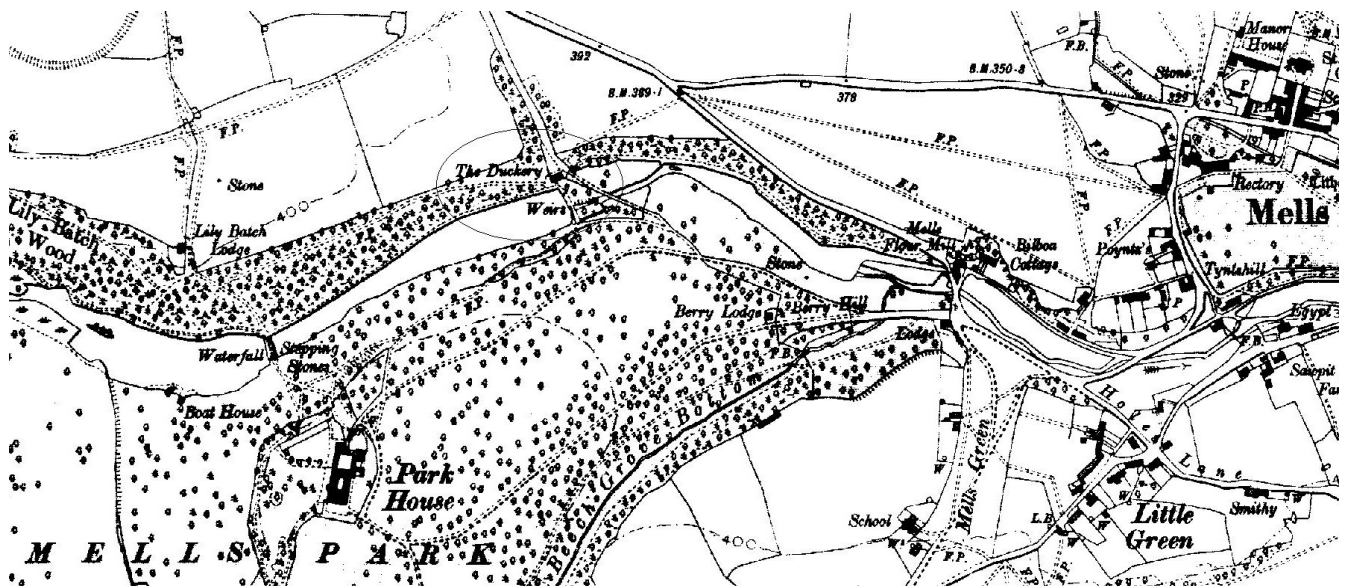
Taken from the book 'Somerset Families by Robert Denning 2002' this picture shows the brothers Thomas Strangeways Horner (1807-1843) and JSH Horner (1810-1874). They were both the sons of Colonel Thomas Strangeways Horner (1762-1844) and his wife Margaret Hippisley. As my great x 2 grandfather Matthias was conceived in August 1823 and born in May 1824 that makes these two chaps the most likely suspects if the following story is true. Thomas would have been 16 years old at the time, making him possibly the most likely, and JSH would have been 13.

My great x 3 grandmother and the mother of Matthias Horler was Susannah Boddie. She was the daughter of George Boddie who was a gardener on the Mells estate which was owned by the Horner family. Susannah was 19 years old in August 1823. Matthias was conceived at least three months before she married Thomas Horler. Thomas was a coal carrier in Mells at the time, he later became a farmer. On its own this quick marriage is not that unusual, even in the 19th century. A hasty marriage to the father of a child conceived out of wedlock before the pregnancy becomes too obvious and before the child is born. It was the done thing. No more would be thought about this other than the existence of a persistent rumour that the child was in fact conceived by one of the 'black sheep' of the Horners of the Mells estate (to quote my second cousin Tim Couzens) and that Susannah was married off to a local man of similar social status with the backing of the Horner family and the local clergy to avoid any scandal. It went on a lot, no doubt, but for one of the young

Horner clan to have been exposed as having conceived a child with the gardener's daughter, someone of low status and outside marriage, would have been appalling for them. If it was a cover up then no evidence would have survived other than through word of mouth. Obviously no DNA evidence would survive or could be tested to prove or disprove it because the male Horner line no longer exists it and no documentation would have been kept if informal deals were done. Maybe even threats to the future livelihood of the Boddie family made? Or did the Horlers and Boddies enter into an arrangement willingly; maybe because they knew very well of the power and influence of the Horners and so no such direct threats had to be made? Or was there some form of financial enticement with the family keeping the Horlers close at hand and keeping them on their land so that the scandal could not break because they were able to control them in that village? If deals were done then the local clergy, who owed their existence to the gentry of the village and lord of the manor would most certainly have been involved maybe even active in making the arrangement.

Thomas and Susannah ended up farming in Mells at Stone Ash Farm, possibly on land owned by the Horner family. George Boddie continued to work for the Horners on their estate but he died only three years later in 1826 when he also left a will which did not survive the Blitz of 1942.

Matthias Horler joined the army in 1841 aged just 18 (22nd Foot Regiment – serving over 21 years in places such as India, Malta, Crimea and Burma) before returning in the 1860's firstly to Plymouth and then back to Mells. In the 1871 census Matthias and his wife were living at Coalpit Lane in Mells when he was a Chelsea pensioner and by 1881 they were living at Duckery Lodge which is on the Mells estate, circled in this map –



Matthias died in 1887 and was buried in Bath.

This rumour of the Horner parentage of Matthias Horler first came to my attention through the family of my great aunt Hettie West (nee Horler). Other less detailed rumours circulated in my branch of the family. I would not necessarily have thought any more about the rumour until it came to my attention through my first cousin once removed Brian Horler that his father George Horler had in fact been told about it by his father Matthias Tremeer Horler who was the first Matthias' son. Matthias Tremeer Horler allegedly believed that the story was accurate, or was being appallingly opportunistic, because when the last male Horner, Sir John Horner, of the line died in 1927 he apparently put in a legal claim for some of the inheritance to the Mells estate. Sir John Horner left no surviving male heir because his son Edward died in the First World War in 1917 and the Mells estate passed to the Asquiths. I have no evidence that such a claim was actually made and I can find no copy of it in existence. But if my great grandfather Matthias did believe the story then he must have been told about it by his father Matthias who must therefore have believed that he was the son of the Horner family and this could only have come about by being told by his mother or one of his other relatives unless the whole thing was invented because of delusions of grandeur.

I do not claim that this story is true. I have no proof or evidence that we are descended from the Horners of Mells. My mother was called Horler and as such I still state in my pedigree that my great

x 3 grandfather was the Thomas Horler who married Susannah Boddie in 1824 in Mells. I am no less proud that that is the case than if it was not true.

Thomas' parents Thomas and Grace Horler are buried in Mells churchyard and this is a picture of their grave, on my family tree these are still recorded as my great x 4 grandparents –



However this is an interesting story that is impossible to ignore and does make one wonder whether there is a genetic ancestry back to the Horners such as Sir John Horner who fought for Parliament in the Civil War and which family line contains the ancient pedigrees of the Hippisleys, Fortescues, Pophams and others.

Matthias Tremeer Horler (possible grandson of a Horner father) and his wife Minnie are also buried in Mells churchyard. Not far from many Horners and other graves of the Asquiths and of Siegfried Sassoon, the First World War poet.

