

Were our ancestors Horlers or Horners?

By Mark Wareham

Updated 9th September 2013

The days are long past when the local gentry in a rural village could run a parish in a completely feudal fashion. Rural communities tend to be different today and the few labouring people who live there do not rely so much on the Lord of the Manor for employment. Village life these days does not tend to mean that the Lord of the Manor owns the houses that working people lived in, that they run the local law system, that they administer the poor relief and determine spiritual life through control of the local church. But families like the Horners of Mells held such powerful positions in 19th century Mells and they had huge power over their community and the lives of workers.

Whether the following story is true or not I cannot say for sure, there is no firm evidence beyond verbal testimony to support it. But there is enough of a whiff of credibility, enough of a possibility and belief within the family, including amongst previous generations who were nearer to the incident in question, for it to be told.

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



The picture above is from the book '*Somerset Families by Robert Denning 2002*' this and it shows the brothers Thomas Strangeways Horner (1807-1843) and JSH Horner (1810-1874). They were both sons of Colonel Thomas Strangeways Horner (1762-1844) and his wife Margaret Hippisley, the daughter of Sir John Coxe Hippisley. My great x 2 grandfather Mathias was conceived in August 1823 and he was born in May 1824 and baptised in July. That would make one of these two young gentlemen the most likely suspects if the following rumour is true. Thomas would have been about 16 years old at the time, making him possibly the most likely culprit because his brother 'JSH' would have been just 13.

My great x 3 grandmother was Susannah Boddie and she was the daughter of George who was a gardener on the Mells estate. Susannah was 19 years old in August 1823 and she was pregnant for at least three months before she married Thomas Horler in late November of that year. Thomas was a coal carrier in Mells and he later became a farmer. On its own this quick marriage is not necessarily unusual, even in the 19th century. A hasty marriage to the father of a child conceived out of wedlock and before the pregnancy becomes too obvious was far from rare and it was the socially appropriate thing to do. Nothing more would be thought of this to doubt the parentage save the persistent rumour that Mathias 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 to a local man of similar social status

to her family with assistance from the Horner family and the local clergy. It went on a lot, no doubt, but for one of the young Horner clan to have been exposed as having spawned a child outside of marriage and with the gardener's daughter would have been appalling for them. If it was a cover up then little trail would have been left other than through word of mouth. DNA evidence would not have mattered at the time and today it would be hard to find because the last male Horner of the direct legitimate line is no longer alive. No written documentation would have been kept, if informal deals were done. Maybe some pressure was put on the Boddie family? Or did the Horners, Horlers and Boddies enter into an amicable arrangement willingly; maybe because both families knew very well that marriage between a Horner and a Boddie was impossible? Or was there some form of financial enticement with the family wanting to keep the offspring close at hand and keeping them on their land so that the scandal could not be exposed? Or maybe the Horners genuinely wanted to look after one of their own and protect the family, even if they were not prepared to publicly acknowledge the birth of an illegitimate son?

The book '*A History of Mells*' by Reverend F.W.Cleverdon 1974' makes a couple of references to the power and influence that Colonel Horner had in the parish. Quoting from a Richard White, whose father was a farmer in Mells, "... in those days the squire had great power and knew how to use it. ... When the [church] service was over many of the parishioners used to wait in the churchyard, making a row either side of the path, till the Colonel passed by, when the men did their humble obeisance by holding the brims of their hats, and the women theirs by respectfully dropping their courtesy."

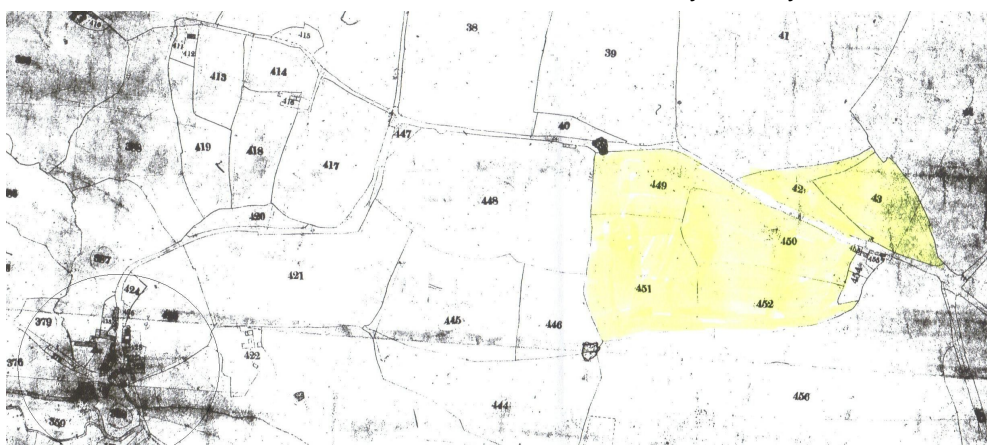
Thomas and Susannah Horler ended up at Stones Ash Farm in Mells (pictured right), probably on land owned by the



Horner family. The extent of their lease of land in 1841 is shown below. The hamlet to the east is Lower Vobster and Mells lies out of picture to the right.

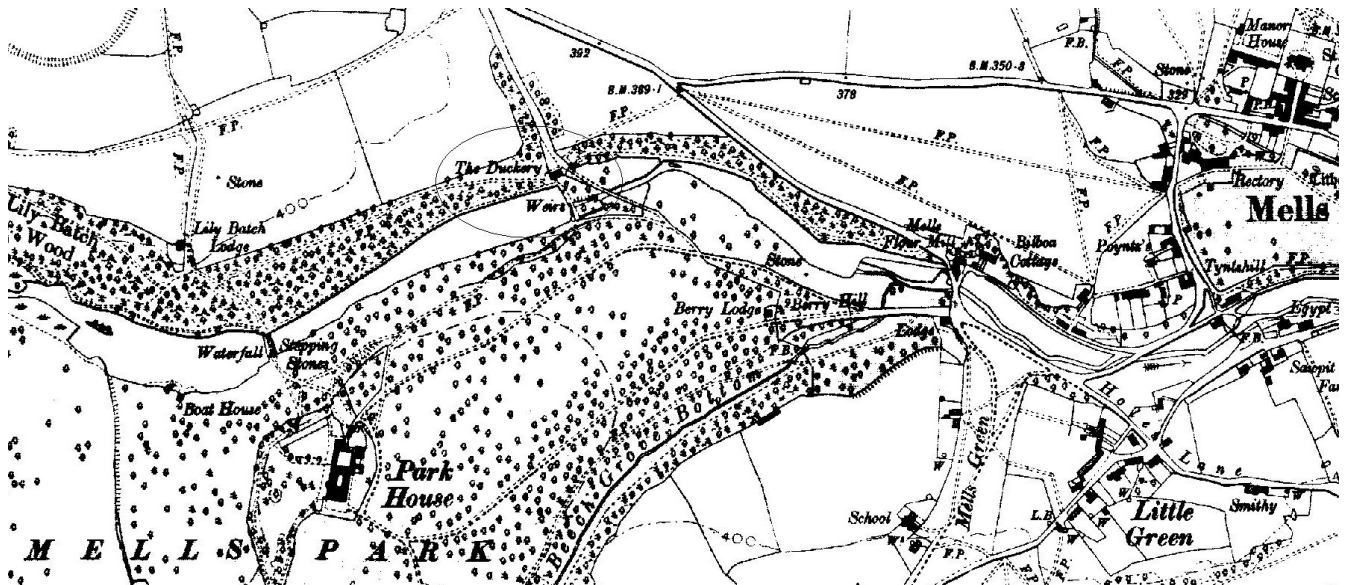
George Boddie continued to work for the Horners on their estate, but he died only three years later in 1826. He left a will which sadly did not survive the Blitz of Exeter in 1942.

Young Mathias Horler joined the army in 1841, he claimed to be 18 when in fact he was just 17 years old. He joined the 22nd Foot Regiment and served for over 12 years in India (see separate essay). Mathias secured medals for being part of the impressive campaigns in the Scinde and Hyderabad which annexed those areas to the growing Empire.



Mathias returned to England in the 1850's and lived in Plymouth where he met and married local woman Emma Patience Tremeer whilst still living in barracks. He then had a further stint abroad with the 22nd Foot in Malta before being discharged and he returned to live in Mells in the 1860's. In the 1871 census Mathias and his wife were living at Coalpit Lane in Mells, when he was a Chelsea pensioner. By 1881 they were living at Duckery Lodge, which is on one of the side entrances of the Mells estate and it is circled in the map overleaf, as The Duckery, and pictured below. Is the location of

this home is just a coincidence, a home for an army hero worthy of a decent retirement, or a retirement home for a relative of the Lord of the Manor? Does this location lend some more credibility to the rumour of a close connection with the Horner family who were living nearby at Park House?



Mathias died in 1887 and he was buried in Bath. Mathias had moved to live at Odd Down in Bath some time after 1881 and his widow Emma (nee Tremeer) lived there until she died in 1933.

The rumour of the Horner parentage of Mathias Horler first came to my attention through the family of my great aunt Hettie West (nee Horler). Other less detailed rumours had also circulated in my branch of the family, but it was often put down to delusions of grandeur, and I would not necessarily have thought any more about it until it came to my attention through my cousin Brian Horler that his father George had been told about it by his father Mathias Tremeer Horler, Mathias' son. Mathias Tremeer Horler apparently believed that the story was true, or was being appallingly opportunistic, because when the last male Horner of the line, Sir John Horner, died in 1927, he made a claim to some of the inheritance to the Mells estate. Sir John Horner left no surviving male heir because his only son Edward had died in the First World War in 1917 and so the Mells estate passed to the Asquiths. I have no evidence that such a claim was ever made and I can find no copy of any surviving documentation. Apparently the only written documentation that survived was held by a farmer in Mells but went mouldy before it could be archived. The claim had no basis of course. Illegitimate descendents had no rights in law and it is impossible to believe that those who did inherit would have been more generous than the Horners that preceded them, even if they did recognise the family link. However if my great grandfather Mathias did

believe the story of his pedigree then he must have been told about it by his father Mathias and who must in turn have believed that he was the son of the Horner family.

One other interesting story lends itself to the Horner heritage. Francina Sarah Tremeer Horler was the daughter of Mathias and Emma Horler. Apparently she had red hair and none of the Horlers or Tremeers had that trait, but I am told that the Horners did. She lived at Duckery Lodge on the edge of the Mells House grounds until her father moved to Bath. During this time she was apparently instructed by her parents to keep out of sight of members the Horner family if they passed by, presumably out of fear of resurrecting the scandal at a time when they still relied on the goodwill of their wealthy neighbours and landlords.

I am not able to say for sure that this story is true. I have no proof or evidence that we are actually descended by blood from the Horners of Mells. My mother was baptised as a Horler and I am no less proud to be a descendent of the Horlers than I would be if we are actually Horners, although it has to be said that the Horner pedigree does hold fascinating history. But 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 the Horner which family line contains the ancient pedigrees of the Hippisleys, Fortescues, Pophams, Gorges and others.

Mathias Tremeer Horler, the possible grandson of a Horner father, and his wife Minnie are were buried in Mells churchyard. They lie not far from other Horlers and not far from the graves of the Horners. My great grandfather Mathias' remains do lie with those of his ancestors, whoever they may actually be.

