

ISAAC INGALL



The name of Isaac Ingall is well-known in Battle for one fact: his reputed age when he died. A visitor of 1788 reported that he and his companion caught

a glimpse of the lofty old hall and one old chamber; and saw yet a greater curiosity, the family butler, Mr Ingall, 103 years of age, who had been a post-boy in York in Queen Anne's reign, and now frequently, in a passion, gives warnings and threatens to leave his place. He was very deaf, else I would have spoken to him; but we both bowed to him, and his age bowed to us!¹



The painting of him, left, commissioned by the Webster family in 1796, states that he had been a servant with that family for nearly 90 years. The death record gives his date of death as 2 April 1798, and his tombstone is still legible in Battle churchyard. Attempting to verify this story starts immediately with this picture: 'Sir Godfrey Vassal Webster' is named ... but in the implied year of 1791 there was no such person, Godfrey Vassall succeeding to the title in 1800. And in 1791 he would have been about two years old.

Ingall's name was widely known but despite his celebrity few accounts survive of him. However, the duchess of Cleveland,² who cannot have known him but would perhaps have known some who did, and more at third hand, wrote:

He was believed to have been in the service of the Websters for more than a century, and himself always declared that he had 'waited at table for ninety years', being, according to his tombstone, upwards of 120 years when he died. According to this, he must have been over forty when he was brought to Battle by the first Sir Thomas (who bought the Abbey) as his postilion, nearly eighty years before – a somewhat elderly postilion – from which position he was gradually advanced to being the head of the establishment. He insisted on holding this post of honour almost to the very last, and used to bring up bottles of wine after dinner, suspended between his trembling old fingers, clinking together like so many castanets. But no-one liked to interfere with him, for always cross and testy, his temper did not mellow with his years, and he grew more and more difficult to deal with as time went by, and left him behind. The following account of him was published in the 'Gentleman's Magazine' by one Stephen Hewitson, who says he 'travelled sixty miles in the snow' in November 1797, to see him. It seems pretty clear that the old gentleman was not unaccustomed to similar visits from lion-hunters, and that he cordially disliked them. The room in which he is described as sitting is our present drawing-room, called the Gothic Room, then divided down the centre by a partition: -

'To my great surprise, I found him in a situation very far removed from the luxuries of life, or the place' (peace?) 'which might be deemed necessary for his years. He was in an antique out-building near the castle gate, where his table was spread under the arched roof: the whole of the building being nearly filled with billet-wood, and scarcely affording room for the oaken bench on which this wonder of longevity was reclining by the fire. His whole appearance immediately reminded me of the latter days of Dr. Johnson; his dress was precisely that of the sage, a full-bottomed wig, a full-dressed chocolate suit with yellow buttons; but the most striking similarity was found in the pensive solemnity of his air and demeanour, *tristis severitas vultus*, which characterised the great moralist of England. There was nothing in his look which impressed on the mind the idea of a person more than almost fourscore years old, except a falling of his under jaw, which bespoke his more advanced age. We were introduced to him in form by a matron who seemed to take it is a high indignity that she was supposed to be his daughter, but who served as a sort of interpreter between us, Mr. Ingall's extreme deafness not permitting any regular conversation. When the nurse explained our errand, in a very distinct but hollow voice he said, 'I am so much obliged to them for the favour they do me, but I am not well, and unable to converse with them.' He then turned his face toward the high part of the bench on which he reclined, and was silent. In each of his withered hands he held a short rude walking-stick about three feet high, by the help of which he was accustomed not only to walk about the extensive premises in which he passed his life, but to take his little rambles about the town; and once (for the old gentleman was irascible) he actually set out on a pedestrian excursion to Hastings, to enquire for another service, because his patroness desired him to be more attentive to personal neatness. It is but justice to the lady alluded to, to add that the uncouth abode of Mr. Ingall was the only one in which he could be persuaded to dwell, and which long familiarity had rendered dear to him...

'He had a very strong sense of religious duty. Till within a very short time, he was in the habit of reading prayers twice a day to his attendant and others, whom curiosity, (or better motives) led to form his congregation; and when the fatigue of this exertion was more than he could encounter, he still, once in the day, performed his public devotions.'

The *Express* (London) contained a report in its edition of 3 April 1798, before his death was known in the capital, which ran:

Lewes, April 2

Mr Ingall, who had resided upwards of ninety years at Battle Abbey, chiefly in his capacity of butler, has lately QUITTED HIS SERVICE, and is now a lodger at the house of a widow, near the Chequer inn, Battle. The above venerable man, who has now completed the *hundred and twentieth* year of his age, was on yesterday se'nnight honoured by a visit from PRINCE WILLIAM OF GLOUCESTER³, and General FORBES, with their Aids-de-camp, and other military attendants.

The *London Gazette* reported his death in its edition of 7 April.

The *Sun*, on 11 April, reported:

Last Monday died, at his lodgings at Battle, which he had occupied just one week, Mr. Ingall, aged one hundred and twenty years. The reason he assigned for leaving the Abbey, where he had been a servant, and chiefly in the capacity of butler, near 95 years, is said to be, that his Nurse used him ill, and a fear that she would shorten his days by some act of violence – founded, most probably, on the childish conceit of old age. He was very fond of snuff, which being intimated to Prince William of Gloucester, when he lately visited him, His Highness presented him with a pound of the best Scotch, accompanied by a one pound Bank-note, which the old man apparently received with great pleasure.

Ingall's claim to fame, such as it is, rests on his supposed longevity; but is the story true?

We know insufficient of Ingall to be able fully either to substantiate or to deny the claim of 120 years, though if the contemporaneous accounts are to be believed he must have been at least 100. An account of July 1798 by William Vidler,⁴ who claimed to have known him, says that his wife died about 60 years before he did, and a researcher⁵ states that Isaac's wife Mary was buried at Battle on 9 December 1751.

If Ingall had been in the Websters' service for some 90 years in 1796, then it is most unlikely that he was of Battle because Webster did not buy the Abbey until 1721. One must look for him elsewhere. Thomas Webster bought Copt Hall in Essex in 1703, and was 'of Fenchurch St, London and Nelmes, Havering, Essex' before then.⁶ Nelmes Park belonged to the Harding Newman family from 1696, and was sold in 1901. (The mansion no longer exists.) There is, however, contrary information to the effect that Nelmes was in the Websters' possession until at least 1720.⁷ There may be confusion here between legal ownership and leasing.

If there are records of Ingall's birth or residence, then perhaps they might be found in the parishes of these last two places. The earliest reference to the country house of Nelmes Park to be found in the Essex county records is 1694, which is followed in 1696 (after the death of the owner Hide) by means of a tripartite indenture involving Godfrey Webster. But the only on-line reference to an Ingall in the county records is to the will of William, of Ardleigh, on the other side of Colchester, dated 1675 (that is, not Ardleigh Green close to Nelmes Park). The records so far accessed contained no London births of an Isaac Ingall of the right kind of age. The only Isaac is one born in Middlesex in 1758, which is clearly too late for any confusion to arise between his identity and that of the older man.

There is elsewhere, however, one baptism of precisely the right alleged age: Isaac, baptised at Braithwell, Yorkshire on 29 July 1677. His mother was Anne, his father Isaac (who appears to have been born in 1646, and who married Susan Parkin at Braithwell in 1668).⁸ Braithwell is near Maltby, just inside the West Riding and close to Nottinghamshire. It appears that Isaac was the third child: Robert and Susan preceded him, and Elizabeth, Thomas and George followed.⁹ His grandfather Randall or Randulph Ingall, a husbandman born in about 1610, features in two minor court cases of 1663-64.¹⁰ Randulph owned or leased some land.¹¹ That this birth is recorded is of course no indication that no other Isaac Ingalls were born then or afterwards.

The West Riding might seem a little far away from Essex or London to be a convincing source for the old man. But Sir Thomas, the first Webster to own the Abbey, himself came from Chesterfield in northern Derbyshire, only some 40 miles away from Braithwell. Sir Godfrey, the third baronet (died 1780) married Elizabeth Cooper of Lockington and her father owned Thurgarton Priory near Newark.

The Duchess again:

The family of Webster, was seated at Lokynton in Yorkshire, before the reign of Richard the 2nd; which estate was, on the Monday following the nativity of John the Baptist, 1388, feoffed by Alicia, daughter and heir of William Webster of Lokynton, to John Herynge of Southburton, and Joan his wife. In the 12th of Henry the 6th, John Webster of Bolsover, in Derbyshire, was returned into Chancery among the gentlemen of that county, who made oath for themselves

and their retainers, for the observance of the peace and the king's laws. Part of that estate was in 1735 possessed by Peter, then chief heir of the elder branch of the family.

George Webster of Greenwich, was master cook to queen Elizabeth, an important office in those days, his will is dated the 13th of July, 1574, and probate is dated the 4th of October, in the same year : from him the present baronet is descended. William Webster of the Ford-end, in the parish of Eaton, Bedfordshire, died in 1587, his will is dated the 5th of April, 1587.

Sir Godfrey Webster, knight, descended from George before named, and Peter of Bolsover, was seated at Nelmes, in Essex, he married Abigail, daughter of Thomas Jordan, merchant, of London, and of the Mere, in Staffordshire; by whom he had Thomas, the 1st baronet, his only child and heir; and died 16th of January, 1720. Sir Godfrey appears to have possessed considerable property in London, and built the Bear-key Coffee-house, and a public house called the Blue Leg, or old Hull house, adjoining in Thames street....

The Duchess clearly states that Lockington was in Yorkshire rather than the rather closer one in Leicestershire – closer not only to the south but also to Braithwell – but the northern/north Midlands origins of the Websters are clear, as is some form of continuing connection with the area.

The only accessible reference to an Isaac Ingall marriage is to St Martin in the Fields, to Mary, on 21 April 1736. This is compatible with our Isaac's wife's name but not wholly with his being a servant at Battle; but it is possible that at that point, although no longer an MP, Webster had retained a London residence as well as the Abbey and Copt Hall in Essex. He sold Copt Hall in 1739, which implies a retreat to Sussex at about that time.

Ingall's will, dated 18 October 1796,¹² gives his property to his illegitimate son Edward Mitten, cordwainer. An Edward Ingall appears in the 1841 census as a cordwainer living at the workhouse, born in Sussex in about 1766; the same researcher who found Isaac's wife says that Edward was baptised at Battle on 14 January 1763. In 1841 a person of that name was recorded as a cordwainer of the right age, an inmate of Battle workhouse; he died at Battle in the second quarter of 1842. One researcher gives Edward's mother's name as Susannah Mitten of Tenterden.

On the other hand an Edward Mitten died at Hurstpierpoint on 13 September 1848, leaving his few assets to his widow Susan. He is presumably not the same Edward Mitten who in the 1841 census is aged 50, an agricultural labourer married to Mary; there are no other Edward Mittens recorded in England or Wales within the right time-frame.

Vidler (1798) says that Isaac's son and grandchildren were then living in London. The only marriage there for an Edward Ingall that to be found in the public records is for a bachelor: he married Judith Gravel on 29 September 1811 at St George in the East. This might not be Isaac's son but it might have been a grandson. No Church of England births are recorded for them in London. There is no marriage of an Edward Mitten until the 1840s. There are other references to 'Edward Ingall' in London records but none can conclusively be tied to the family of the old man of Battle.

However, we now have a record of someone of the correct (and rather unusual) name whose date of baptism fits the reputed age of the old man. Perhaps he was 120 after all. But doubts must remain. For example Byng reports that he was a paper boy at York 'in the reign

of Queen Anne' (1702-14) which seems misplaced for one born in 1677, who would have been in his late twenties and early thirties. And if he had a child in 1762/63 then he would already have been about 85: not impossible but unlikely. Similarly, it appears that the mother would have been only 27 at the time of conception: an unlikely union. There were also long visits to the North when he was apparently at a very advanced age. The researcher who reports these items thinks that maybe Ingall may have been about 100 when he died.¹³ If Byng was correct in saying that Ingall was 103 in 1788 then he was 113 when he died, and perhaps this is nearer the truth. A few men have been reliably recorded as reaching this age. Given the paucity and imprecision of available record, it is hardly surprising that no birth can be found for him in about 1685.

As not all events were recorded in the records or thereafter transcribed, the case must still be open.

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¹ John Byng: *Byng's tours* (ed David Souden, Century, 1991)

² Duchess of Cleveland: *History of Battle Abbey*

³ William (1776-1834) was a nephew of George III and also his son-in-law. The dukedom died with him.

⁴ In *The Universalist's Miscellany* for that year.

⁵ <http://www.rootschat.com/forum/index.php?topic=328030.0>

⁶ <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1690-1715/member/webster-sir-thomas-1676-1751>

⁷ The Webster family papers held by the East Sussex Records Office.

⁸ http://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=bivri_EnglandBirth&gss=sfs28_ms_db&new=1&rank=1&msT=1&gsln=ingall&gsln_x=1&MSAV=1&uidh=f63

⁹ <http://www.rotherhamweb.co.uk/genealogy/ingall.htm>

¹⁰ http://www.connectedhistories.org/Search_results.aspx?pc=Micklebring&sr=bc

¹¹ <http://www.conisbroughheritage.co.uk/1653.html>

¹² <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/rd/eb415601-2762-481b-b6ba-59f48fe3dbe9> notes this; the record is held at the East Sussex Record Office.

¹³ BDHS Springford Archive, File 001.