

Read All About It

by Melanie Winterbotham

There were no local newspapers in north-west Middlesex in the early nineteenth century, but news of matters major and minor in Ruislip, Northwood and Eastcote made its way into the press right across the country. As editors filled much of their space with material borrowed from other papers, especially London journals, local news turns up in surprising places. The *Northampton Mercury* took a special interest in Ruislip. A poet J.W. Dalby had works with Ruislip themes published in the *Mercury*, and it would appear that he had links with the area and with the editor of the paper.

The British Library's digitised newspaper collection, though by no means exhaustive, reveals much of the press coverage. Not surprisingly, the murder of John Brill in 1837 (*RNELHS Journal* 2006/2) features in detail in 20 publications from London to Scotland, and the subsequent trial in 1845 occupies many column inches of 43 papers.

Lightning strikes at least twice

1837 was a dramatic year, for in September, we learn the sad tale of two boys killed in their home by a lightning strike. Eileen Bowlt has related this, as published in *The Magnet* of the 4 September 1837, and discussed some of the facts (*RNELHS Journal* 1993/3). The story was carried by at least 30 other papers, improving as the beer flowed at the inquest.

The *Morning Post* of Tuesday the 29 August 1837 reported 'from diligent inquiries made on the spot' that in a furious storm the previous Saturday, several trees and outbuildings in Hillingdon had been struck by lightning, and two cows killed. The roof of The George Inn in Ruislip had been damaged. The family of John Bignell, 'a farmer' in Eastcote had just sat down to dinner when

'the electric fluid' came down the chimney, killing two of his children, John and James, and severely scorching two other children and their mother. Mrs Bignell, 'the mother of a large family' also incurred a dislocated ankle, and was likely to be rendered a cripple for life. Mr Bignell and a servant were unharmed. Furniture was thrown around, and the two boys' clothes were still burning when help arrived. An inquest was to be held at 'The Red Lion Inn' at Eastcote. (This proves a rule of journalism: if you don't know the name of something, then make it up!)

The inquest was held at The Black Horse on the 29 August, and reported in the *Morning Chronicle* the following day. It was attended by the vicar, 'Rev Mr Pack' (sic), and a great number of the surrounding gentry. The inquest took several hours, during which the reporter was lapping up stories from the locals, who were probably after a free pint.

Several other cottages had been damaged and their inmates struck to the ground. Some might not survive their injuries. Mrs Temple, the wife of a market-gardener, and mother of five, was knocked insensible with an infant at her breast; both suffered severe scorching and neither was expected to survive.

The two boys were aged nine and seven. Mrs Bignell was unable to leave her bedchamber, so was questioned there until she became 'overpowered by grief and fell back on her pillow senseless'. Mr Bignell confirmed that his wife had a broken leg and was badly burned in the upper part of her body.

Local farmer Richard Yates had been passing at the time, about 1 o'clock, and had seen that most of the roof had been torn off the Bignells' house, and two large trees on the road opposite 'shivered to pieces'. Jane Webb

'a servant in Mr Bignell's family' told the inquest that 'the walls and furniture were shattered and the windows smashed to atoms. 'At the close of the inquiry information

was forwarded to the beadle that the infant of Mrs Temple had just expired and that the mother was not likely to survive'.

No. 670.	John Bignell Ruislip	30 Aug: 8	E. Pack.
No. 671.	James Bignell Ruislip	30 Aug: 3	E. Pack.
No. 672.	Lightning		

The stark information is that the burials register, above, of St Martin's Church shows the burials on the 30 August and the vicar has written 'Lightning' underneath. The ages of the boys differ slightly from those in the reports; they are actually eight and five years old. The register also shows that the Bignells had already lost their eldest son in infancy. Contrary to the reports, the only other child was a two year old daughter Emma, who died in 1840. What the reports missed was that Jane (Mrs) Bignell was four months pregnant, but perhaps that was just seen as normal. Surprisingly, and happily, the baby was born safely in the December. Named Phoebe, she married twice and lived latterly in Field End Cottages. Two more sons born in the 1840s also survived. Jane lived to the age of 71, and her husband John to the age of 95, by which time he had accommodation at 'The Church Houses' in Ruislip.

I am glad to say that Mrs Temple survived, although she died at the relatively early age of 41. She kept her baby, and had more. She was Rebecca wife of Robert, a gardener labourer who worked later in Acton.

In 1841, Robert was enumerated as a M.S. (male servant) at Eastcott Lodge, with Rebecca and four children in another household just a few dwellings down from him.

As Eileen Bowlt has observed, John Bignell was not a farmer, but an agricultural labourer, and it is an interesting reflection on the journalists' view of their readership that he is almost immediately raised in class status. Similarly, it is implied that Robert Temple has a market gardening business, while he is actually a live-in employee. Richard Yates is also an agricultural labourer, of Horn End or Wiltshire Lane. No doubt Jane Webb was a servant, but not to the hapless Mrs Bignell. She was probably the thirteen year old eldest daughter of labourers in Wiltshire Lane, and may well have been employed at the Black Horse. It is worth noting however that the licensee of the Black Horse was a Mary Gregory; Gregory was Jane Bignell's maiden name, so maybe there was a connection with the pub. Either way, there is nothing new in twisting facts to improve a good story.

Reference:

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