

The Tales of Charles Lamb, part 3

by Melanie Winterbotham

Life was rough in Ruislip in the 1830s and 1840s, and challenging to those who had to implement justice as it was prescribed. The case of Charles Lamb, an inveterate criminal, most of whose crimes involved poaching or sheep stealing is interesting. Although there was plenty of circumstantial evidence to convict Lamb of murder in 1837, the prospect of condemning a man to the ultimate penalty without absolute proof led the judges to acquit him [see *RNELHS Journal* 2008 'More Tales of Charles Lamb' by Celia Cartwright]. In fact, this man led quite a charmed life for one who frequently broke the law as it stood.

His close brush with the death penalty was no deterrent to Lamb. In 1838 he was back in the dock for stealing bark from the estate of Ralph Deane, and sentenced to seven years transportation. Although he spent some time in prison and on prison hulks, he probably never left these shores, and he was certainly back in Ruislip by March 1842 when he married the woman with whom he had been living, the widowed Charlotte Bray. The following year (1843) Lamb was tried, but found not guilty of stealing a sheep belonging to Benjamin Way Esq. in Denham.¹

In April 1849, Lamb was sentenced at St Albans to fourteen years transportation for stealing a sheep belonging to Mr White of Oxhey Hall. St Albans jail was no barrier to Lamb who escaped with three other prisoners by the age old method of tying their bedding together as a rope and descending from the chapel window. They had made a hole in the wall between their cell and the chapel with a piece of iron they had removed from a bedstead.

This was serious enough for the prison governor to leave for London at three o'clock in the morning and report the case to Euston Police station at half past four. After registering the information at Scotland Yard at

five o'clock, he proceeded to the 'Hue and Cry Office' at Bow Street and to the Telegraph Station in the city to forward the intelligence to Liverpool. The under turnkey organised the printing and distribution of bills to be sent to London and Watford by the morning coaches, and they were 'in the shop windows in St Albans before nine o'clock'. Various policemen spread the word to police stations in the vicinity.

Lamb is said to have been in leg irons that night. Whether or not he was ingenious enough to extricate himself from leg irons, he did not have the ingenuity to evade the police. In no time he was arrested in Ruislip woods where, of course, the police were keeping watch.²

Surely this time, the sentence of transportation would be enforced. However Lamb was back at the Old Bailey in December 1854 when he was sentenced to six months confinement for stealing 40 lb of hay from Mr George Bates, a farmer. It was noted by the court that 'he had served part of his time at Portsmouth, and had been out nine months on a ticket of leave, when he committed the present offence.'³

In 1856 Lamb was implicated in colluding with the theft of pheasant eggs, but discharged. This seems to be his last brush with the law, although the next year (1857) his son, also called Charles, received a fine for stealing partridge eggs, the property of the Marquis of Donegal.⁴

One wonders what Charles was up to in his earlier days. He had married Sarah Bray in 1821 and had a daughter Sarah in 1822, but no more children were baptised locally until Mary in 1829 and James in 1832. Sarah died in 1833 and their daughter Sarah did not live with Charles after her mother's death [witness statement at the murder trial].

Charles Lamb probably died in 1858 (burial at Harefield on the 24 January 1858) aged about 60.

Charlotte's Story

Lamb and his family were clearly on the breadline, and this does seem to have been recognised by some in authority, though not apparently by the Ruislip overseers. While Charles Lamb was in prison, Charlotte could not support her three children. On the 7 September 1839, Charlotte Bray was charged at Uxbridge Petty Sessions with deserting her three children, leaving them in the workhouse chargeable to her parish of Ruislip. Charlotte had been given the liberty to seek a situation out of the house and had secured a position in East Acton, but lost this position owing to the tardiness of the guardians in granting the permission. She had instead been working in London, where she could earn 5 or 6 shillings a week. The guardians had ordered her back to the workhouse, but she had refused and had absented herself.

Charlotte explained that her husband [James Bray, but not the James in the 1837 murder case] had died and she had taken up with Charles Lamb about three years ago. The youngest child was his.

"My eldest is ten years of age and my opinion is that they are better in the workhouse than they were out of it".

Asked on what ground she contended that she could do what she liked about her children, she replied

"The guardians gave me leave to get a place. Previous to that, for nine weeks, I received out-door relief from the Union ... I did not wish to go into the Union workhouse ... I can maintain myself, but not them by working at stay stitching and shirt making."

She said she rented a room in London.

The bench considered the case, clearly wrestling with the regulations.

Mr Clark: *"It is a clear case of vagrancy."*

Mr Dagnall: *"That may be, but I should make a difference between the case of a woman who leaves her children destitute and deserted, and one who leaves them in a place of safety at a union workhouse, as the defendant has done, and by whose own account they now look different than they did before."*

Mr Clark: *"The only question before us is – are the children an expense to the parish, and has the defendant deserted them?"*

Sir W Wiseman: *"When the Board of Guardians took the children into the workhouse, they ought to have notified the overseers, and they ought to get a warrant and have her committed, instead of which they let her be at liberty for six months".*

Mr Dagnall: *"Would she promise to take the children out of the workhouse if she were discharged".*

Charlotte: *"It was no use for me to take them out to starve, as they must".*

Mr Clark: *"Then you say you may roam about and go as you please, and leave your children to be supported by the parish?"*

Charlotte: *"I will get a situation as soon as I can and do all I can for my children."*

She would not have left them, only the guardians allowed her only one shilling each week, and she had managed to make that do as long as she could. The magistrates discussed whether she should be committed to prison, but concluded that she would lose the chance of any work.

Mr Woodbridge (solicitor): *"The case comes under the 5th Geo.IV.cap.53, sec.4, by which every person running away and leaving his wife, or his or her children chargeable, or whereby she or they, or any of them shall become chargeable to any parish, township or place, shall be deemed a rogue and vagabond, within the true intent and meaning of the act ... can be committed to a House of Correction & kept to hard labour for up to three months".*

Mr Larkin, overseer and constable of Ickenham: *"It was a pity the poor woman was not assisted by the guardians in her endeavour to support her children with the parish where she was known"*. He had known the defendant for many years, and had never heard anything against her beyond her living with Lamb.

Mr Dagnall: *"Did Larkin think she could get farming work to support her"*.

Mr Larkin: *"Yes, but the three shillings per week ... is not enough. It is driving them to do that which they would not otherwise do."*

Sir W Wiseman: *"With three shillings per week, and what they can earn, many a poor man supports a large family."*

Mr Dagnall: *"I consider it impossible for a widow to keep three children out of three shillings per week."*

Clark suggested a conviction of vagrancy, and Dagnall a conviction under the 3rd section of the act, meaning one month's detention, but Woodbridge advised that it would have to be under the 4th clause, and so three months detention.

Dagnall: *"It is a most unpleasant duty to execute the law as it stands ... I am for giving the lowest punishment possible."*

Woodbridge: *"That would be the third clause which says 'neglecting or refusing to work'. This poor woman has no work."*

Clark: *"Then I must protest against her being punished for that. That would be inflicting a double punishment against her I have no objection to her being discharged."*

The bench then determined on discharging the defendant who quitted the court with the overseer.⁵

In 1841 Charlotte and her children Jane, Aldred and Charles were living in Harefield in the household of Walter Prendergast, a lime burner. When she married Charles Lamb in 1842 she described herself as a seamstress, but could not sign her name. By 1851 her daughter Jane had married another member of the numerous Bray family and Charlotte, Aldred and little Charles lived with them in Harefield Lane. Charlotte died in January 1855, aged only 41, and was buried in Ruislip.

References

¹ *Bucks Herald* - 17 June 1843 ,

² *Hertford Mercury and Reformer* - 3 February 1849; 14 April 1849; 21 July 1849

³ <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org>

⁴ *Windsor and Eton Express* - 31 May 1856; 23 May 1857

⁵ *Windsor and Eton Express* - 7 September 1839; *The Charter* - 8 September 1839 ,