

## **THE CURRELLS OF NORTON**

The concrete connection between the Currell families of Preston and of Norton is that in the census of 1851, James Currell (born 1773) who lived at Norton from at least 1841-51 specifically said that he was born at Preston. James' parents were Thomas and Mary Currell. Why did they go to Preston in the early 1770s? There was already a Currell family there in 1781 and as the Currell name is so uncommon and Preston is such a small village, I believe that it was no coincidence that the two families were there but rather that they were related.

A more tenuous link is that Elizabeth Currell (born Norton 1841) married George Payne who was born at Poynders End, Preston in 1866.

There were 403 people living at Norton according to the census of 1841.

I have scoured the parish registers of Norton, Herts. Although the Currells are ever-present in the nineteenth century, the first mention of the family there is the baptism of Ruth Currell, the daughter of William and Sarah in 1750/1.

William's birthplace is unknown. However, I suggest that he was the son of William and Frances Currell and that he was born at Willian in about 1720. (See the Currell family of Willian) He married Sarah Race at St Marys, Hitchin in July 1747/8. Sarah was baptized at Hitchin parish. Their first born, Thomas Currell, was also baptized at Hitchin in September 1747/8. Thus, the family probably moved from Hitchin to Norton between 1747/8 and 1750/1.

According to the Militia Lists, William was a labourer. He and Sarah had seven more children who were all baptized at Norton – sadly, three died as young children.

### **Thomas Currell 1747/48 - 1829**

William and Sarah's first-born son Thomas (b1747/8) moved around the parishes near Hitchin, presumably in search of work. Reading the trail provided by the Militia Lists, he was at Norton in 1768-69 but had moved to Hitchin parish by 1771. There he married Mary Beaumont at St Marys in May 1772. Their first son, James, told the enumerator of the 1851 census that he had been born at Preston around 1772 although I cannot find a record of his baptism in the Hitchin parish register. Thomas and Mary's second child, Elizabeth was baptized at St Marys, Hitchin in May 1773.

Thirteen years later, in 1786, the family was back at Thomas' home village of Norton. However, this move was not the result of a decision made by Thomas. In January 1776, the overseers of the poor at Hitchin removed him from their parish to his parish of Settlement ie Norton. The Removal Order is important because it is only this which establishes the identity of James' parents for it refers to Thomas, Mary and their sons, *James* two and a half years old, and Shadrach who was about six months old. So Thomas and Mary lived in Hitchin parish for five years – some of the time (if not all of it) at Preston. The 1841 census shows James living very near to his brother Shadrach – which may confirm their close family relationship.

### **The Currells and poverty**

The story of the Currells in Norton is typical of so many families. They mostly stayed in the village, married local people and the men worked as farm labourers. They were unremarkable apart from the poverty they endured. The Currell name often featured in the accounts of the Overseers of the Poor between 1827 and 1835. (When considering these

payments, one should bear in mind that the wage of a farm labourer in 1830 was 9 –10 shillings.)

Thomas Currell (husband of Mary) was described as very ill in February 1827 and was allowed 2/- a week for a period. When he eventually died in 1829, his funeral expenses of 17/6 were paid by the parish. His widow received some aid in 1830s including a “coals allowance” of 3/- in March 1831, and when Mary died in 1833, her expenses were also covered.

His grandson, John, (Shadrach’s son born 1805) was not a well man. He was married and had two children in 1829 when he began receiving regular payments of five shillings of Poor Aid. He and his wife Alice had four more children between 1829 and 1833 and the payments increased slightly to six shillings. When John died in March 1835, aged 30, his funeral expenses were also paid by the parish.

Meanwhile, in 1829, Samuel Currell (Thomas’ nephew born 1788) began receiving aid of 3 - 5 shillings a week and Shadrach also received payments of between two and five shillings starting in 1831. We know from a later account that Shadrach was living in one of the parish almshouses in about 1833.

In 1833, Shadrach’s son, James Currell (born at Preston 1773) received weekly aid of 7 shillings for a several months. A George Currell (probably Shadrach’s cousin) was also helped with weekly payments of two shillings in 1834.

### **Samuel Currell 1811 - 1882**

In Norton, there was an extraordinary episode which involved one of Shadrach’s sons, Samuel.

Samuel (“Sammy”) was born in 1811 and never married. However, he had at least one child, Noah, by his late brother John’s widow, Alice, with whom he was living in 1851. Noah was baptized at Baldock rather than Norton which was possibly a wise decision. Samuel and Alice could not marry as it was illegal for a man to marry his brother’s wife. Alice had two other children after her husband died and one might suspect that Samuel was their father, also. All three children died in infancy.

In September 1840, he was fined £4 with £1 costs for using a gun to kill game. As he wouldn’t, or more likely, couldn’t pay the fine (which was about two month’s wages), he was sent to the House of Correction at St Albans for three months with hard labour.

Less than six months later, the incorrigible Sammy was before Hitchin magistrates again. He was charged with stealing three fowl, the property of Thomas Peacock of Willian. Peacock’s shepherd, Joseph Copse, had gone into his master’s yard at between three and four o’clock in the morning and saw Sammy coming out of the hen-house with a chicken in his hand. When Sammy saw Copse, he dropped the fowl into a drain, climbed a gate and ran away only to be caught by Copse.

Peacock also saw Sammy in the yard, climbed over a wall and asked him who he was to which there was no reply. Peacock then hit Sammy with a gun. Sammy said, “Don’t hurt me Mr Peacock”. Peacock replied, “Oh it’s you, Sam” - “Yes, master” - “You’re a bad one” - “Yes I am, master”. (*laughter*)

Another witness, Thomas Grey, said that he had found the fowl dropped by Sammy in a gutter and two more in different places. Sammy was found guilty and was sentenced to

another three months in the House of Correction with hard labour – 14 days to be in solitary confinement but not more than seven consecutive days.

In 1873 there was an attempt to evict Sammy (“an old man who sometimes repaired the local roads”). Shadrach (“Shady”) and his wife had lived in the village’s almshouses since 1833. The properties had been owned by Morris Pryor\*. Shady’s family was often in receipt of parish relief but interestingly in 1837 there was a *payment* of 18 shillings by Shadrach to the Overseers of the Poor for a cottage – one of four such payments for cottages. The old cottages were either “pulled down or fell down” and in 1853 were replaced by four new homes, which were known as the “pound houses”. Samuel had been a tenant in one of the new homes since Michaelmas 1853. There was a story that to persuade Sammy to leave his old home, Morris Pryor offered him rent free accommodation in a newly built red brick house beside the church gate.

It was stated that Mr Pryor was a “gentleman of very considerable property and a very particular man of business but he was not particularly strict in getting in his rents”. However, he had never sued anyone in his life.

Mr Pryor’s daughter, Cotton (now, Mrs Browne) had inherited the cottages. As she was unable to prise any rent from Samuel, she gave him notice to quit on 20 March 1872.

Samuel’s defence was that his relatives had built a house on the land, therefore acquiring title to the property and had always lived in the new cottage rent-free. (This was disputed by Mr Pryor’s representative who claimed that there was a record of Samuel paying rent three times in 1853) It was also stated that Samuel had given up his old home on condition that he could live in the new one rent-free.

The case was adjourned, but Samuel was offered £10 and payment of his costs if he would give up his possession of the cottage and pay rent. The offer was refused.

Sammy won his case but his defence cost all his savings. Nine years later, in May 1882, he died in Hitchin Workhouse but his successful legal battle was featured in a book dealing with the history of Norton.

(\*Morris Pryor of Weston was from a wealthy family of Baldock brewers. He was the son of John Izzard Pryor and is frequently mentioned in his diary – “A Chronicle of Small Beer” by Gerald Curtis. There is a connection with Preston as Morris was the uncle of Henry Pryor who purchased the Temple Dinsley estate in 1873.)

### **George Currell b 1850c**

George Currell, aged 26 a labourer from Baldock who was entered in the calendar as being able to read and write imperfectly, pleaded guilty to setting fire to a stack of straw and was brought up this morning for sentence. His Lordship said that the prisoner had pleaded guilty to the offence of wantonly and maliciously setting fire to a row of stacks of barley and straw in Hertfordshire and the reason he gave was that he wanted to be transported. The prisoner little knew what transportation was but would by the sentence he was about to pronounce on him learn that the law was not to be set at defiance with impunity. He would be kept in penal servitude for ten years. (November 1876)

### **William Currell b 1824c Hertford**

There was an extraordinary news report concerning a son of George (b 1784c Norton) and Elizabeth Currell at Hertford:

“William Currell, an advocate of the physical force theory who possesses a “local habitation” in that refined faubourg of the town, Butcherly Green, and generally employs himself in the easy occupation of doing nothing and occasionally in some things not much more useful, although perhaps more equivocal – was brought before the bench in the custody of the police charged with being drunk and disorderly and resisting police constable Baker in the execution of his duty.

It appeared from the evidence that the prisoner had been regaling himself at the Wheatsheaf public house in Back Street until he became more than usually turbulent and forced upon the landlord the unpleasant necessity of calling in the aid of the police. But Currell, like Cuffay, was not to be daunted by a “minion” of power and when police constable Baker arrived:

*Beheld him with mute scorn – with folded arms  
And then bade him begone, deridingly  
Saying that in the town there were but five  
Minions like him and five were not enough  
To capture Currell. No, nor yet a score.*

The constable however entertained a different opinion and quietly proceeded to to remove the pot-valiant disorderly, when he was met with menacing manifestations from a troop of Milesian confederates who had assembled outside the house. Stones were thrown – threats uttered – and Young Ireland was advancing to the rescue with Celtic enthusiasm. Was there to be a popular emeute (sic)? Was a young revolution about to emanate from the dusky faubourgs of Hertford? The constable began seriously to ponder on his predicament, when, bethinking himself of his staff, so efficacious in mob maladies, he

*Quick from his side the sturdy weapon drew  
The foe full well the fatal emblem knew  
And at the sight shrunk from intended riot  
Before that potent instrument of quiet.*

The apparition of another constable (who it was thought might also have a staff about him) completed the discomfort of the Milesians and induced a hasty helter-skelter retreat. Being thus left to himself, the valiant defier of *all* the police in the borough after a brief but violent struggle surrendered himself into the hands of *one* and was escorted to the police station. The bench inflicted the penalty of 5s for drunkenness and cautioned Currell to be more moderate in his cups and less heroic for the future.”

### **George Currell b 1819c**

In 1839, George Currell (20) and Edward Craft, labourers of Norton were sentenced to transportation for 10 years for stealing a sheep (value £1) from Morris Pryor. They sailed on the *Maitland* on 22 March 1840 and arrived at New South Wales, Australia on 14 July 1840.