

George JAMES

Looking at the parish registers of High Littleton one could be forgiven for thinking that George James never went far from the village, as he was born, married and died there. A settlement examination of 1786 tells us otherwise.

George James was born in High Littleton in about 1757. At the age of 17 he apprenticed himself to Messrs. Cook, Lovell & Chilcott, rope makers of Cathay in Bedminster for 7 years. His Master, Mr Cook, drew up an agreement, whereby George would receive 5/- (25p.) p.w. for the first 3 years, 6/- p.w. for the next 2 years and be paid as a journeyman for the last 2 years. No apprentice fee was paid and George had to find his own board and lodgings.

George duly found himself lodgings in Bedminster and had served his master at Cathay for 2 years, when his life suddenly changed dramatically. George was press-ganged! He was seized and taken aboard a man-of-war, where he was held for 3 days before being drafted into a merchant ship, a brig called the Joseph. The Joseph, under Captain John Pill, was bound for Madeira. George was no sailor and, three weeks into the voyage, when he was wondering if life could possibly get any worse, it did! The Joseph was captured by a French man-of-war. After enduring even worse conditions on board, George was eventually taken to France and imprisoned for an indefinite period. However, four months later a number of French and British prisoners of war were exchanged and George was brought back to England. He made his way to his parents' house in High Littleton, where he lay ill for about 10 weeks. When he was recovered he got a job in the coal mines in High Littleton and worked there for 6 months.

Just when George was thinking that High Littleton was a much safer place than the streets of Bedminster and Bristol, he received a visit from Mr Lard, Mr Cook's foreman, who had heard that George was back. Lard reminded him that he still had 5 years of his apprenticeship to serve. George weighed up his options, which would have included imprisonment for breaking his apprenticeship agreement and left the pit and returned to his master's service at Cathay. However, Bedminster wasn't a lucky place for George. Three months later he fell off Bedminster Bridge and injured his back badly. Mr Lard said it was George's own fault that he fell and refused to pay him anything when he was off work. George lay ill in Bedminster for a week, then with Lard's permission returned to his parents at High Littleton to recuperate.

By now George had had enough of Bedminster and decided that he wasn't going back, whatever the consequences. A week later he was sufficiently recovered to get a job with Zebedee Wilcox, a rope maker at Ston Easton. George worked for Wilcox for 11 months as a weekly journeyman before quitting and, after spending one night at his parents' house in High Littleton, went to London. He worked at Greenland Dock for 6 months, then Woolwich Rope Yard for about a year, before deciding to leave London for good. George returned to High Littleton in about 1782/3 and spent the rest of his working life in the coal mines.

George married Ann Rapps at High Littleton on Boxing Day 1785 and had 4 children. Neither George nor Ann could read or write. In later years they received blankets from Mary Jones' Charity but otherwise made few demands on the overseers for poor relief. George was still working in the pit, when Ann died in 1821. In November 1831 the Vestry resolved that George should live in the poor house then occupied by Josiah Dury and have part of the garden belonging to it. This house was adjacent to where the Primitive Methodist Chapel now stands. George received 1/6d. p.w. parish relief for the last 3 or 4 years of his life and died in August 1835 at the age of 78. No doubt he had some good stories to tell his grandchildren!

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